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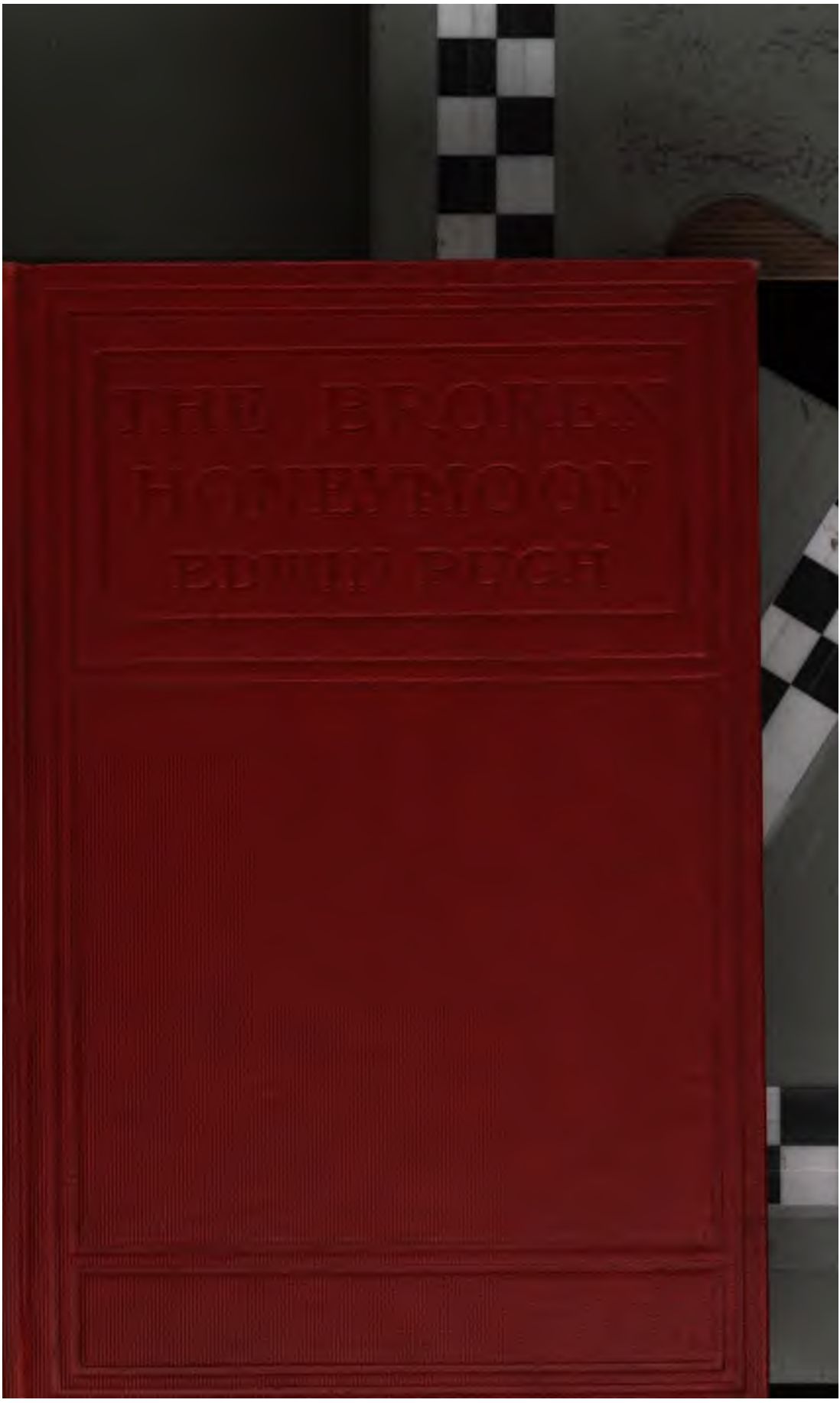
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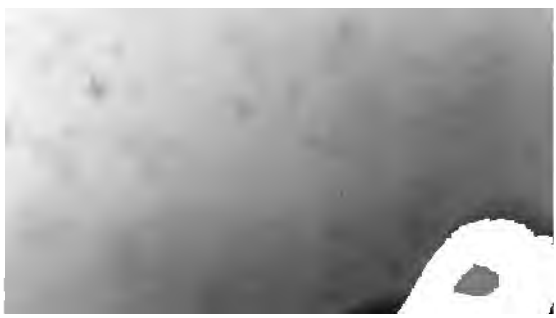
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THE BROKEN
HONEYMOON
EDWIN PUGH

















THE BROKEN HONEYMOON

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THE BROKEN HONEYMOON

CHAPTER I

THE CONOVERS

WHENEVER I look back on the days of my courtship the figure that bulks largest in the retrospect is always that of the Scapegrace Mother.

The Conovers were a graceless family altogether, every Jack and Jill of them—with the noble exception of my own Rosetta, of course; but undoubtedly the head and front of their offending (as she certainly seemed to be the prime cause) was Mrs. Conover herself—the Scapegrace Mother, as I have dubbed her.

Of all the slatternly trollops that ever neglected her hooks and eyes Mrs. Conover was the most abandoned and incorrigible. The dress she wore indoors happened always, by some inscrutable mischance, to have been recently torn away from the gathers, usually at the back, so that a sodden lumpy tail for ever dangled and flopped in her wake as she

slommocked about. She was always pinned together precariously and conspicuously, always in a state of buttonless disarray about the neck and breast, with puckers of dirty linen and torn discoloured lace peeping out from the gaping front of her bodice. Her hair was a crowning untidiness of raying strands and clotted wisps, forming a sort of ragged broken aureola about her head. She was one of those women who can truly and most unhumorously be said to enjoy bad health; her constitutional maladies were many and various and much insisted on. She was a round-shouldered, grey-faced little woman with eyes set flat in her face and unshaded by any least projection of orbital bone: weak watery eyes of the colour of new slate. Her features were small and mean and peaked. She had no teeth or eyelashes or eyebrows, but her cheeks were thickly covered with a fine reddish down that shone in certain lights like a boy's virgin whisker. She had no sense of time or locality or order. She was always on the point of beginning some task that she ought to have completed long ago; always looking for something that she ought never to have mislaid. When everybody else was ready she was always found to be unready. If anything tripped anybody up it had always been left in the way by her. She never closed a door behind her, or cleared up any of her muddles, or turned off



a tap that she had set running, or removed a kettle or saucepan from the fire, after emptying it. She blazed a trail of neglected duties and scamped jobs behind her to mark every stage of her tortuous way through life.

And yet she was never sorry or apologetic or humble or meek, as one felt she ought by rights to have been pretty often. On the contrary, she was usually in a state of angry indignation with others for discovering and rectifying her manifold faults and errors. She never pleaded guilty to any of the sins of omission and commission that she was incessantly making. She argued and bickered and nagged and scolded, and insisted on her shiftless self from morning till night. She was always in the wrong and always vehemently ready to prove herself impossibly right. There was no sterner judge of others than she; no more bitter censor of others' follies and weaknesses and misdemeanours. It will be no matter of surprise, then, when I tell you that troubles in the Conover household were like the recurring-decimal.

Her husband, Mr. Alfred Conover, to whom she had borne eleven unsatisfactory children — and Rosetta—was the sort of man that, at my first introduction to his family, I felt he could hardly help being with such a wife: a feckless creature of a colourless type, hen-witted, dictatorial, peevish. He

was a pompous man who mistook arrogance for dignity; a conceited man who thought that if he spoke slowly and emphatically he must necessarily speak with weight and judgment and pith; a silly man who mistook dulness for wisdom, and lack of imagination for virtue. His person was thin and spare. He was tall and bent and angular. He had luxuriant black hair, curling crisply over a high, white, narrow forehead; the mouth of a shrew, and the eyes of a ruminating cow. In his youth he had been a beauty man, a ladies' man; but all that had belonged to a phase of his weedy development long past. At the age of fifty he was chiefly remarkable for the fact that he always appeared to have shaved the day before yesterday—and not very cleanly then. He was a clerk in the firm of solicitors which also employed me, receiving, but not earning, forty-five shillings a week. He had never had any other billet and would never have retained his present position a month if the head of our firm had not been a sort of distant cousin of his, or in some other indefinable way connected with his family.

Twelve children have been mentioned as the offspring of this pair. Seven of them were luckily dead. The five who remained were all girls, except one.

The eldest was Amelia: an anæmic young woman, subject to fits, who assisted her mother to make a general mess of things about the house. The next

was my own Rosetta, a girl of twenty-two when I first met her; she followed the profession of a school-teacher; and her character may be left to unfold itself in the course of this chronicle. There was a gap of ten years between Rosetta and the twins, Phœbe and Maud, two pickles who might have changed minds and never known it. Ambrose, the youngest-born, was five years old and destined for a great career—as all his elder brothers and sisters had also been in their turn, until they died or grew out of it.

I had been about a month in the office of Messrs. Keogh & Maw when one evening, as we were putting things away for the night, the conversation turned on the hackneyed theme of the usual lodgings and the usual landlady and the usual unsatisfactoriness thereof. I thought that Mr. Conover paid rather more attention to our talk than its threadbare quality seemed to warrant and I suspected him of having a special interest in the subject. He was such a transparently stupid man that he never left you in any doubt as to what was passing in his mind. Indeed—as Crichton, our overgrown office-boy, used to say in his tired way—whenever Conover got a new idea, which was seldom enough, you could always hear it rattling in his empty head like a pea in a bladder.

As I reached for my overcoat Mr. Conover said, very affably for him :—

"Pardon me—" he was invariably ceremonious— "but are you doing anything to-night, Smallpiece?"

"I thought of going to bed," said I.

"I am sorry to hear that you are indisposed," he murmured, stroking down his full, silky moustache and looking a little perplexed.

"So am I," I said. "Who told you I was?"

He blinked rapidly and gathered up the corners of his mouth, which was his way of smiling.

"You mentioned—ah—going to bed. I naturally surmised you might be suffering from a cold," he said.

"Merely suffering from a pain in the pocket," said I. "It's Friday."

"Why not come home with me?"

I could see Crichton winking like a defective electric light over Mr. Conover's shoulder, and opening and shutting his mouth spasmodically. I hesitated.

"One of my daughters plays the piano. And we all sing a little. And my youngest also plays—the violin. Very wonderful child! We are, as one might say, harmonious. Quite unambitious, of course. Will you come?"

It did not sound alluring; but—I went. I was curious to know what sort of *ménage* the Conovers' was.



They lived in Tufnell Park, which is a region of trams but enlivened by a good deal of greenery. Their house was a small, semi-detached villa in a blind alley terminating on a high blank wall abutting on a steam laundry. It had a name to itself and was called "Rocklands"; and it was one of a double row of similar jerry-buildings, all fairly new, but composed of such cheap, inferior materials that they had already fallen into a state of premature decay—like Crichton. A fly-blown card in the upper-parlour-window intimated delicately that a bed-sitting-room was to let—"Room" being printed large and "bed-sitting" very small—suitable for a respectable young man; and thus was revealed the secret of Mr. Conover's unusual interest in our conversation on the subject of lodgings. The house was three-storeyed, with two front doors, one leading to the basement, the other—up a flight of six or seven stone steps—to the drawing-room floor. Both sets of steps were dirty and unswept, and did not seem to have been hearth-stoned for months. Whorls of dust and a litter of dead twigs and leaves and fragments of torn paper that had been ground underfoot into the accumulated filth were scattered over the steps, and gave to the whole frontage a discredited bankrupt appearance.

Mr. Conover had to lift the heavy iron front-gate bodily to admit us; for it was broken off its upper

hinge; and a rustier or more decrepit gate I have never seen.

"I am afraid we must use the servant's entrance on this occasion, if you have no objection," said Mr. Conover.

Wondering what would have happened if I had had any objection, I made the usual inarticulate noises indicative of polite assent.

"We—my wife—has somehow lost the upper door-key, and the lock has got jammed, and altogether it has become what I believe stage-managers call 'impracticable,'" said Mr Conover.

"It doesn't matter in the least," I assured him.

"Pardon me," he insisted. "It matters a great deal. It creates a false impression. Mind how you go! One of those lower steps is loose. It is either the second or the third or the fourth. I always forget which."

I went cautiously after him down the precipitous flight, steadying myself with my hand against the damp wall, from which the stucco scaled and fell in a grey rime as I touched it. Mr. Conover knocked long and loudly. There was an instant sound of scurrying feet within.

Presently Mrs. Conover, the Scapegrace Mother, appeared. I have already given you some details of her person and character. It is only necessary to add that on the evening when I first beheld her she



wore, in addition to her ordinary slatternly attire, a wisp of chiffon about her neck, starched stiff as buckram, and freshly put on, but ragged and soiled and dingy. She blinked rapidly at me, even as Mr. Conover was in the habit of doing, and I perceived that one of them had insensibly caught the trick from the other.

"My dear," said Mr. Conover, clearing his throat and flourishing his hand in my direction; "I have brought home a visitor from the office. Pray let me introduce you. H'm! Mr. Smallpiece."

Mrs. Conover fumbled nervously at the wisp of chiffon and it came partially untied, one end sticking up and tickling her ear, which she rubbed violently with her left hand whilst she gave me her right. And her fingers were greasy with paraffin oil which stank abominably. I have ever since associated the Scapegrace Mother with that peculiarly pungent offensive odour.

"How do you do, sir?" she said mincingly. "You will find us upside-down, but hearty."

"Come in," said Mr. Conover; and I went in; and he leaned his full weight against the door and latched it—at the third or fourth attempt. "Things get out of order," he explained.

"Some of the boards have given way," said Mrs. Conover, sniffing. "Tell the gentleman to step careful, Alfred."

And I soon discovered that it was one of Mrs. Conover's habits rarely to speak to you directly; but to instruct others to speak for her; and thus she evaded much painful responsibility.

I stepped carefully, as advised. I should have done so without any warning; for that underground passage was dark as your pocket, the thick glass panels in the door, which might have admitted a little light, being cracked all over, so that they seemed to be covered with spiders' webs, and were only held together by pieces of stamp-paper. Despite my care, however, I trod on something that felt like a small, hard, round pudding in a bag. To this day I don't know what it was, and so it may really have been a pudding; for even a pudding on the floor of the passage would not have been so very remarkable a phenomenon in that haphazard establishment.

"Come upstairs," said Mr. Conover.

And I followed him to the first floor where it was lighter and airier, but not so light and airy as it might have been, because the landing-window was also starred and cracked and stuck together with pieces of stamp-paper.

Mr. Conover with some vague apology left me alone in the drawing-room; a typical suburban drawing-room, but differing from the normal type by several degrees of shabbiness and dirtiness and disorder. It was large and lofty and well lighted—too



well lighted, seeing that it might have appeared less disreputable had its details been obscured by a gloomier atmosphere. It was furnished with a green plush suite, the wooden frame-work of which was so scarred with scratches that they made a crazy pattern on its surface; each article was moreover chipped and broken; and the plush was defiled with spots and stains of grease; and the springs in the padding had gone awry and were even, in one or two places, sticking out through the lumpy seats in a whiff of horse-hair stuffing. There was also a piano. And there was a very murrain of bamboo: bamboo tables and bamboo music-receptacles and bamboo flower-stands and bamboo screens. The carpet, the wall-paper, alike of a pretentious ornate design and shoddy material, screamed of vulgarity. The pictures were mostly old steel engravings spotted and fly-blown, for many of them lacked glass, or Christmas-supplement plates, garishly coloured, in grained-wood frames; the smaller ornaments comprised a number of cheap squat vases and oddments of crockery and photographs in frames, dotted about on brackets and on the piano and on the imitation black marble mantelpiece, whereon stood also a huge mirror—cracked, of course—in a crumbling gilt frame. And everything in the room was most flagrantly tawdry and cheap and pinchbeck and the least tasteful of its kind. Worse! everything was dirty and faded and

dilapidated, not by honest wear and tear, but, one felt instinctively, by reason of sheer slackness and neglect. The signs of slackness and neglect were on everything like thumbmarks on the fair pages of a book. To multiply intimate particulars would be merely tiresome; but two instances may be given of the details that made up the whole sorry effect: the bamboo music-receptacles bulged with a crumpled-up mass of torn and dirty and dog's-eared music-sheets, thrust in impatiently and crammed together anyhow; from a cracked art-pot on a bamboo pedestal, set in the bay of the window at a drunken tilt, dirty water had dripped and trickled down upon the carpet and lain there and soaked in, staining its chequered brown surface with a sprawling patch of bilious yellow.

I sat on the sofa—one end of which had given way and was propped up by a wooden box—and gazed about me and made one great comprehensive resolve that no inducement of men or angels should ever persuade me to make my habitation under that roof. And as I sat there, over against the open door, I heard Mr. Conover and his wife squabbling below-stairs. The squabble seemed to have originated in a senseless dispute about a few odd minutes of time, as I was to discover that most of their squabbles did, the Scapegrace Mother having the dilatory person's incurable desire to make it out



earlier than it was, and her husband, like most fidgety men, being equally set on proving that it was considerably later.

"What brings you home so early?" I heard Mrs. Conover ask him.

And it may be here observed that throughout their squabble there was an undercurrent of some accompanying expostulatory voice, keyed to a lower pitch. This, I have reason to believe, was the voice of Amelia, the eldest daughter, whose habit it was to foment and promote strife between any other members of the family whenever they seemed at all disposed for a shindy.

"Early!" cried Mr. Conover. "What on earth do you mean? I am exactly seven minutes later than my usual time."

"First I've ever heard of your having a 'usual time'."

"My dear woman, if I am anything at all I am at least punctual."

"Then you ain't anything at all. Because you're before your time to-day."

"I tell you I am exactly seven minutes late."

"And I tell you—as you call it—I know better."

"Your clock is slow, I expect. It generally is."

"Then why don't you buy a new one—magnificence! Can I help the clock? Besides, it isn't

slow, as it happens. It's two minutes fast. And, what is more, I don't go by the clock at all."

"You go by instinct, I presume?"

"No, I don't. I go by the horn at the steam-laundry."

"Are you aware, my good woman, that that horn is set in action by human agency?"

"I am not aware of anything, as you call it, my good man. What's more . . ."

A door slammed and the rest of the altercation reached me as an indistinct mumble.

Presently I heard Mr. Conover coming upstairs again with a companion. His companion came laggingly, and as if reluctantly, a few paces behind him. I rose as Mr. Conover appeared, and entering said, with an air of preparing a dramatic effect:—

"Let me introduce you, Smallpiece, to my second daughter . . . Rosetta!" He beckoned her.

A moment of suspense on my part, of arrested action on his, as he stood with one long arm extended against the door, and then Rosetta drifted slowly into my purview and paused, framed in the open doorway.

At this distance of time, with the intorted strands of use and custom cramping my memory, I can hardly tell what sort of creatures I had expected Mr. Conover's offspring to be, or even if I had pre-



figured them at all clearly in my mind. But this I know: that I had not expected to find either of his daughters the kind of woman that Rosetta was. She came upon me with a shock of utter and complete unexpectedness, so that I was dumfounded and at a loss at sight of her, and do not remember how I greeted her, except that I am sure it was in very confused and blundering fashion.

It was not only that she was rarely beautiful, but she was also a strikingly fine specimen of the human animal—if I may employ a slightly objectionable phrase—full-breasted, large-hipped, massively and roundly and swellingly limbed. Her face was squarely-hewn and very pale, but a faint flush, such as is sometimes seen in the heart of a white rose, enriched its pallor, and saved it from any suggestion of sickliness. Her eyes were large, of a changing hazel, and deeply set under straight, heavy brows. Her rather untidy, abundant hair was yellow as ripe corn. Her beauty was of the tigress type; but her forehead was broad and her small ears were daintily and delicately shaped, as her hands would have been also had better care been taken of them in her childhood; and these signs set a stamp of high intelligence and definite character upon her personality. For the rest she was demurely dressed in a plain skirt and bodice of dove-grey, relieved at the throat and wrists by thin lines of frilling.

And yet . . . this truly superb, this magnificent creature, who might have posed for a statue of some daughter of the gods—the simile is trite, I know, but I want now to tell you just how she impressed me then—and who looked at least five years older than her actual age—was shy. Childishly and distractingly shy. Awkward she could not be, nor absurd in any way. But her manner was quite painfully self-conscious; her smile was uncertain, wavering, embarrassed; her expression almost frightened; and she spoke with a laboured enunciation and a careful deliberateness that it somehow disconcerted you to feel aware of.

"My daughter is a schoolmistress, Smallpiece," said Mr. Conover.

"Only a teacher," she corrected him, and blushed vividly at the sound of her own voice.

"Only a teacher—as yet. Though I believe that 'mistress' is the older and more exact term," said Mr. Conover, with the air of a professor correcting a backward pupil.

"It is a noble profession," I ventured, achieving a portentous fatuity.

"I don't like it a bit," she said, with a sudden flash of eyes and teeth. "The children—do you care for children?—you can't—I hate them."

There did not seem to be any tactful thing that I could say in reply to this crude outburst.



"I'm not good at it—teaching," added Miss Conover, "I haven't got the knack of it, somehow. I ought to have gone in for something else. It isn't my vocation. But you get a good education—cheap—that way." Already her shyness was leaving her.

"My daughter has invariably taken a very high place indeed in all the examinations she has taken part in," said Mr. Conover in his most pompous tone.

"That is because I am so tremendously in earnest about passing them," she explained to me. "I give my whole mind to study. The other girls have lots of outside interests. They let themselves be worried about—about other things—about people—about how they will get on in their career—and all that."

These are not precisely her words; but clumsy as they are, her own words were clumsier, and her sentences more disjointed. And yet she had an air of considering her utterances very carefully beforehand.

"H'm! I think, if Mr. Smallpiece will permit me, my dear, I will go downstairs and ascertain how the evening meal is progressing," said Mr. Conover presently. "I may be able to be of some assistance. Keep Mr. Smallpiece amused, Rosetta. Show him the album or something."

And he left us in a flutter of coat-tails. When he was gone Miss Conover began to fidget on her chair, and to smile vacantly, and to arrange and re-

arrange her mouth, and alternately to stare at me and blush, and at the floor and frown.

"Tufnell Park seems to be a pleasant sort of suburb," I remarked at last, to make talk.

"I think it's absolutely beastly."

"Ah—yes—well—there are a lot of trees, though, aren't there?"

"Yes," she said. "I feel so sorry for them—poor things!"

This sounded much more promising. "Why?" I asked.

"They remind me of myself," she answered. "They are all shut in among ugly things that don't suit them."

"Ah!"

"I'd like to travel, wouldn't you?"

"Of course."

"It must be nice to get out of England."

"Yes. Because if you never get out of it you can never have the joy of coming back," I observed profoundly.

"I don't know that I should want to come back."

"No?"

"No." She seemed to turn over something weighty in her mind. "America, now," she said. "I think it would be lovely to live in America."

"But why, particularly?"

"It's big. And it's young. And I've an idea

they aren't quite so silly and dull as English people."

"Silly—in what way?"

"Don't you think English people are very silly?"

"In some ways I suppose they are. But then, so are other nations—in other ways—I imagine."

She paused and fixed her gaze steadily on my face.

"Father says you are very clever."

I hope I blushed effectively.

"Of course he's no judge, I know," she added with the brutal directness of the young. "But I should say he is right this time."

"He says you are clever, too."

"Oh, I can learn things—yes," she said carelessly. "I didn't mean that."

"No?"

"No. That's only a habit, learning things. You simply have to make up your mind to learn them and then—you just do, that's all."

I laughed. "Speak for yourself," I said. "I'm afraid I am one of those who just don't."

"That's what I say. You don't need to do it. You are really clever."

This was gratifying, but puzzling too. "I hardly understand," I said.

"I mean that, as I say, it's easy enough to mug up a lot of different subjects; but the way of learn-

ing how to look, and what to say and do, and how to do it—that—that is difficult."

"Well, I have good cause to be careful about all those things, but you ——" I left the sentence in smiling suspension.

"Oh, we're an awful low lot," she said, with a sudden gratuitous coarseness. "It's in our blood. Why, my mother's brother is a potman."

To my considerable relief these painful family disclosures were brought to an abrupt conclusion by the reappearance of Mr. Conover with a further instalment of his family: his twin daughters, giggling and sheepish, and the infant phenomenon, carrying what old-fashioned dancing-masters used to call, I believe, a kit. The twins were sickly, rickety, lanky girls, chiefly remarkable for dishevelled heads and loose, red mouths, and a general appearance of undue legginess. The boy-fiddler was an obese child in such tight clothes that his figure seemed to be made up of one huge sausage and four lesser sausages, stuck together on stiff wires and topped by a pantomime-mask with goggling eyes and immense swelling red cheeks, surmounted by a wild mop of honey-coloured hair. Mr. Conover presented the children to me, one by one, impressively. Then the twins sat down side by side on the sofa, whilst the boy stood in the centre of the carpet staring owlishly at me and snoring noisily.



"Mr. Smallpiece has expressed himself as most anxious to hear Ambie play, Rosetta," said Mr. Conover.

Miss Conover turned and regarded me with a touch of disdain. "Indeed," she said.

"Yes. I have heard a good deal about Master Ambie," I said evasively.

"I can believe that, at any rate," she said. "Everybody has heard a good deal about him since Phelim died."

"Phelim was our youngest but one, Mr. Smallpiece. He, too, had talent," explained Mr. Conover. "But not equal to Ambie's."

"And Carlotta, who also died, had talent, Mr. Smallpiece. But not equal to Phelim's," said Miss Conover. "And Estella, who ——"

"My dear!" her father expostulated.

"Well, Father, I don't honestly think Mr. Smallpiece can really want to hear Ambie play. It must have been his politeness that ——"

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed, sharply. "How can you know anything of Mr. Smallpiece's tastes? Mr. Smallpiece is a most cultured young gentleman."

"So I have understood," she said. "Going to play now, Ambie?"

"No," said Ambrose definitely.

"Very well, then. That settles it," said Miss Conover.

"Fie! Oh fie, my dear Rosetta!" interposed her father. "You know the dear child always has to be pressed."

Miss Conover shrugged her shoulders indifferently, rose and sat down at the piano. She had very expressive shoulders; and as she sat there, whilst Mr. Conover coaxed the bashful genius, they expressed an aggravated sense of patient resignation to the worst.

At last, after half an hour of wearisome cajolery and threats and bribes, Ambrose was persuaded to perform. Of his performance it is best to say no more than that it seemed not more tiresome than that of most infant prodigies. It lasted a great while and was punctuated throughout by a persistent intermittent knocking on the party wall, kept up by the next door neighbours who happened not to be on speaking terms, I gathered, with the Conovers at that time, and who chose that way of wreaking their spite. So long as the entertainment lasted—and had it been Sarasate wielding the bow instead of little Ambrose Conover it must have seemed interminably long, with Miss Conover's face hidden from me—so long the dull, head-splitting tattoo continued.

"I shall certainly have to complain to my landlord about it," spluttered Mr. Conover, who had grown very red about the eyes. "They can't always be putting up pictures."

"But they can always say they are," Miss Conover observed with a yawn.

We partook of supper in the front room on the ground-floor: a room that smelt sour and damp and musty and was a sort of hospital, it seemed, for all the brokendown furniture, all the shattered ornaments, all the odds and ends of miscellaneous rubbish that accumulate in the course of years in all households, but which are usually consigned to the dust-bin or the second-hand dealers. By comparison with this room the drawing-room attained to decency and seemliness. It was a room plethoric with furniture. There was no space in which to move with any degree of comfort, not to speak of dignity. The atmosphere was hot and humid and thick and stale. A huge wasteful fire burned in the ruinous grate, though the night was muggy; the fender was heaped up to the second bar with ashes and tea-grouts. A kettle poured out a dense jet of steam to mingle with the exhausted air. A vast mahogany sideboard sprawling across the entire width of one wall, and serving as dresser, displayed a few pieces of cheap crockery hung on nails or stacked in piles; but it was mainly occupied by a bewildering muddle of such unusual articles as bundles of old rags and dismembered fragments of books and periodicals; a general unclean litter, heaped up in dishes, of waste food-stuffs, the outer

husks and rind and peel of vegetables and fruit, scraps of fat and gristle and bone, and mouldy crusts of bread, an indescribable medley of decaying refuse. But I am aware that no minutest catalogue of details could ever convey any true impression of the surpassing squalor of that room.

And the meal was an orgie of such cheap artificially preserved things as give no trouble in the preparation. There was soup—out of a tin; and tinned salmon; and corned beef and potted meats and pastes — all out of tins; and jelly out of a mould made of glass and tin; and tinned tomatoes and tinned pine-apple. Even the cocoa that we drank after our meal — a greasy fluid with a thick oily brown sediment—came out of a tin canister; and the beer that we drank with it had a flavour as if it had been brewed of tinned herbs. The only comestibles that were served in a natural state were the bread and the cheese; and they—as if to compensate for other deficiencies—were served with a superfluity of natural grime. And a heavy odour of paraffin pervaded the atmosphere, and seemed to impregnate and sully all things with its rancid hot savour.

The ordinary furnishings of the table also partook of the makeshift, haphazard character of the rest of the room's appointments. There were pickles in a saucer, milk in a sauceboat, sugar in a slop-basin,

salt in a cup, vinegar in a beer-bottle. The knives and forks and spoons were a heterogeneous collection of all sorts of bone and metal ware. No two pieces of crockery matched each other, but seemed to have been taken from various different sets, like the cutlery. And the glasses were of all kinds, too, from a really beautiful Venetian drinking-horn, which was allotted to me, to a wineglass without a foot, and in one instance a jug lacking a handle. Yet the whole display was on a scale of profuse prodigality. There was an overwhelming abundance of everything, a riotous redundancy of eatables and drinkables, and of the necessary implements wherewith to consume them.

It was Amelia, the eldest daughter, subject to fits, with swollen features and a ghastly complexion, who presided over this meal. I have no longer any grudge against poor Amelia; and, as she plays only a minor part in this chronicle, I need merely say here that she was an inferior edition of her scapegrace mother; inferior and even more objectionable because she added a tart acerbity of manner and tone, and a most grossly unpleasant face and person to the consummate gracelessness of Mrs. Conover.

Throughout the meal Rosetta maintained a sullen silence; and I could see that she was undergoing unspeakable torment. From her, at least, not one of her family's faults was hid. She, at any rate, ap-

preciated the unspeakable nastiness of their ways and habits of living. All the time, she sat and scowled and glowered and looked as unlovely as it was possible for her to look. When the infant prodigy, Ambrose, who ought obviously to have been in bed hours before, overturned his mug of beer and flooded the table-cloth, and was then jerked out of his chair by his mother and sent reeling across the room before the buffet of a ringing cuff on the head —Rosetta laughed. If she had screamed it would have been less painful. And when Amelia snapped out at this: "Don't see anything to laugh at!" she seemed to reply with her eyes, though she uttered no word: "Oh, Sister, Sister! don't you see that I laugh only that I may not weep?" What sorching pangs of humiliation, what searing shame she suffered it is not within the power of any human intelligence to compass. One must have endured that kind of agony to understand it. But that she suffered most deeply and keenly, and had been so suffering for years of dire experience, was plain for me to see as the strangely mature beauty of her girl's face, and the young strained solicitude of her covert sidelong glances at me.

At last it was over; and I shook hands with them all and bade them "Good-night"; and Mr. Conover donned his hat to bear me company to the corner, and put me in my right omnibus.

"You saw, perhaps, that we have a room to let?" he remarked, as we walked along.

"Yes."

"I thought—you were expressing yourself as dissatisfied with your present lodgings. H'm! I meant to suggest that you should inspect the room we have for disposal."

"Thank you," I said. "I'll take it."

He was surprised at my prompt acceptance of his interested offer of hospitality, but not that I should entertain his proposal at all; which was more surprising. It was hard to conceive of such obtuseness; but I verily believe he had grown so used to the vile conditions of his existence that he found nothing much to complain of in them.

"You'll be comfortable," he assured me. "We'll see to that."

Then with the quick shallow cunning of his kind, he launched upon a sea of eulogy—of the house, of the neighbourhood, of the high social qualities of his family, and so on, with a passing reference to Rosetta's beauty and cleverness—seeking to make a shrewd bargain as to terms with me.

I hardly listened to him. I nodded assent to everything. It did not matter. His utmost cupidity could not prove itself rapacious. He had too mean a mind to rise to any commanding heights of chicanery. And I was ready to pay any price

for the privilege of seeing Rosetta again, seeing her very often.

Thus it came about that, vowing I would ne'er consent, I consented; and a week later found myself installed as a lodger under the Conover roof.

Life under that regime was neither pleasant nor profitable.

I have tried to convey some impression of what sort of household it was. And yet, for all my considerable pains, I cannot but feel, on reading over what I have written, that I have still left my purposed task in a woeful state of incompleteness after all; and that a good deal more remains to be said if I am to burn the impression in. And I want to do that. I feel that it is essential I should do it. Because it will all help to explain Rosetta. And—my faith!—she needs a devil of a lot of explaining. Though the worst of explanations is that they are usually so confusing.

Still, it is a good stretch of years since I lived at Rocklands, and so I may claim to be forgiven if what I remember of my sojourn there is rather fragmentary. You see, we none of us think in complete stories, really, but as it were in a succession of pictures. We fish up something out of the rag-bag of our memory and hold it up to the light for a moment and consider it and then drop it at our feet



and dip again. And after we have dipped a good many times all we have accumulated is a heap of parti-coloured rags; a sort of literary patchwork. Put me to writing about a set of people who never existed outside the bounds of my imagination and I will conduct them from the cradle to the grave in an orderly decent manner, describing all their actions and thoughts and feelings, their environment and their circumstances, with may be a few incidental allusive glances at their heredity, so that out of the woof of my fancy and the warp of my literary skill I shall weave you a most entrancing pattern of romance.

But, harking back to my days with the Conovers, my chief recollections of them are all trivial—and irritating, as trivial things are apt to be.

I recall that I seemed to spend most of my time in waiting for unimportant events to happen. I mean events like the bringing up of my shaving-water, the call to meals, the arrival of my clean linen, the reappearance of my boots that I had sent down to the basement to be cleaned.

Most often when the shaving-water arrived it was quite cold; before I heard the call to meals—commonly delivered by Amelia in a raucous shout from the kitchen door—it was time for me to start out to go somewhere and I must go hungry; the cart did not come with any clean linen at all, because my

linen had somehow not got itself taken to the laundry that week; and only one of my boots reappeared, in the company of another boot belonging to somebody else, and thus I had to go beating about the house and routing in dirty corners—there were no other kinds of corner in Rocklands, and it was a house rich in corners. Some people call this sort of thing Bohemian. I considered it altogether damnable. It frayed my nerves and harried my temper and reduced me generally to the philosophic level of a peevish old maid. Probably you have never known what it is to live in a house run by a scapegrace mother, with a scapegrace daughter as first lieutenant, and a tribe of scapegrace children to complicate their ill-devised schemes and heap confusion on confusion's head. You may never have experienced the wistful monotony of never possessing your own things, but always somebody else's that don't fit you, and are grievously inferior to yours into the bargain. You have not, may be, experienced the shock of finding mysterious frilly garments mixed up with your underwear, or of pulling on what looks like one of your socks only to find that it is somebody else's unexpectedly long stocking. There was a chest of drawers in my room, and it was the oddest kind of practical joke in the guise of furniture that I have never laughed at. To open any one of the drawers you had to tilt the whole contrivance for-



ward; and then they all dropped out simultaneously and wounded you. And when they dropped out they scatttered your belongings all over the dusty floor. But if you succeeded in getting one open—with a knife, as you open an oyster—then you found that the bottom of that drawer had somehow disappeared altogether, leaving a hollow mockery or wooden shell containing nothing but exasperation. Oh, but it was a weariful experience never to know when you were going to be fed; never to know where your things were, no matter how carefully you might have put them away; never to feel that you had any first-rights at all in any of your properity. It is saddening to find that your razors have been used for some inscrutable purpose and rendered blunt, and then slyly restored to their case in a damp condition; that your brushes are greasy and wet and your sponge sodden; that your tooth-brush tastes of brick-dust and your shaving-soap has shrivelled into nothingness. And the additional infuriation was that no one was ever found guilty of these misfeasances. A holy air of innocence pervaded the establishment whenever there was a demand for explanations. You referred gently to your necktie. "Necktie!" exclaimed (say) Amelia, as if she had never before heard of such an article of dress in connection with a gentleman's wardrobe. Or you mentioned studs, and Mrs. Conover, asking for fuller and more precise

information, said; "Studs? You mean studs for your collar?" as if, conceivably, you might have had a racing-stud in your mind.

Yet, despite the habitual squalor and the atmosphere of mean, pretentious poverty in which they lived the Conovers had their reticences. They talked in a large way about money, never descending to any sordid details of figures. Even though, inevitably, I grew to be perfectly and intimately acquainted with the sum of their resources they never openly and frankly admitted me to their confidence. I was always surprising them in the midst of some secret confabulation, from which they would rise at my entry with suddenly hushed voices and abashed looks. I had found that Mr. Conover had all the shallow man's love of the profitable end of a good bargain; but, the bargain made, he showed no disposition to insist on its due fulfilment and had I been a shabby rascal I could have cheated them finely. Indeed, Mr. Conover professed that his interest in the family finances was loftily academic and impersonal. He left all that sort of thing "to the wife"—as he expressed it, in the odious phraseology of the clerkly tribe. It was with Mrs. Conover that I settled my weekly bill; and I greatly doubt if she would ever have presented it had I not made a point of reminding her. And then I had always to tell

her how much it was I owed exactly. And she would always argue that I could not owe so much; that I could not have eaten all the meals and burned all the coals that I claimed to have consumed. Invariably she ended our business colloquys by suggesting that I should pay a little less than the amount we arrived at. If it came to eighteen shillings she would bleat out: "Oh, let us say sixteen and six . . . no, sixteen and three . . . I couldn't take more." Heaven knows what muddled motives urged her to this attitude. I merely state the bare fact. To explain it is, frankly, beyond me. And—another of her whimsies!—she would never take the money from my hand; so that I had always to lay it down on the table surreptitiously, as if by inadvertence; and a few minutes later it would be gone and the back of her would be disappearing through the open doorway, her tail expressing acute distress and shame.

CHAPTER II

AN ALL-NIGHT VIGIL

A MONTH has passed. I am at the exhibition with Rosetta. It is the one exhibition that continues, year by year, in London; and each year it pretends to be different, but every year it is the same. Which is well. For, in its way, it is the most perfect thing of its kind outside Paris.

It was a sultry night toward the end of May; and the gardens were thickly thronged. We sat at a little round table: she drinking iced coffee with a demure affectation of being used to it; I with a tall fizzing tumbler set before me, from which I sipped discreetly in the intervals of smoking.

We listened to the band and watched the people.

The scene had an air of Bank Holiday. Lacing and fretting the pinchbeck splendours of the stucco mosques and temples were loops and festoons of crudely-tinted glass globes, hectic under the nacreous glare of the electric lights that swam above. Pulsing gleams of raw colour, orange and scarlet and

green, played on the moving, motley multitude, mirrored prismatic refractions in the rippling fountains. The general effect was a little cheap and tawdry, perhaps; but it was imbued too with glimmerings of the true spirit of carnival, the irresponsible spirit of childish gaiety. And when Rosetta remarked, in that oddly suggestive way she had which I fear is hardly to be translated into any cold formality of words: "Doesn't it make you feel as if you were on the stage?" she expressed my mood no less than her own.

"Blessed are the light of heart," I remarked, with a valiant attempt to live up to her conception; "for they shall inherit the present."

We stayed until the lights were being put out, one by one, with an oddly melancholy effect, then joined in the mob that was swarming toward the exits. The crowd was boisterous here and there; and once or twice I had to clutch Rosetta's soft arm to keep her from being torn away from my side. At last she slipped her hand under my sleeve of her own accord. I looked down at her. She was smiling up at me.

"It is nice to be looked after," she purred. And I felt knightly.

But how had this delightful happening, this happy association of Rosetta and myself, come to pass? I had been in Rosetta's company since two o'clock.

We had visited the Royal Academy together and afterwards taken tea together in a Piccadilly shop. And then had journeyed on by omnibus to Earl's Court.

The whole blessed sequence of events had arisen out of a talk about pictures, entered upon last night. Rosetta knew a surprising deal about pictures, as they are to be known by the London student. She was—a little wearily—familiar with the treasures of the National Gallery and the Tate Gallery. She had visited Watts's studio, and some others, on adventurous Sunday afternoons. She had been a constant beauty-seeker at the Guildhall series of exhibitions, and every year found her at Burlington House. She had piles of *Art Journals* stacked in her bedroom; and she read the Art Notes in the weekly prints and the monthly magazines. She knew her Ruskin. With the glories of foreign galleries she was also on terms of intimacy through the medium of their reproduction in chaste photogravure. It was a wonder and a joy to me to find her thus learned in the things that I too took a fervid interest in. It was an astonishing experience also to find that she could talk on these matters—with some traces of affectation, no doubt; that was inevitable—but, nevertheless, with real intelligence and right appreciation and sympathy. Indeed it was startling to find that she could talk with any fluency of

abandonment at all. For she was ordinarily so very reticent, moody, sullen almost. The degradation of her daily life preyed upon her so that she observed a scathing silence at most of the family debates, and never added more than a scornful word of bitter comment to the table trivialities of conversation. But on this Friday night of unfading memory she had suddenly grown expansive, eloquent. I had brought home a magazine and it contained an article on the Louvre, with illustrations. At supper she had caught sight of it lying on the sofa, and had picked it up impulsively, unthinkingly, and opened it—a dreadful breach of decorum in that household, where others' belongings were only tampered with in secret! And then, catching my eye, she had apologised with a radiant blush for appropriating my property . . . "but books are so tempting"—and then—we had fallen to talking as only the young and ardent can talk of the pompous abstractions of Art.

Our halcyon day together had been the joyous outcome. I had met her at Piccadilly Circus, and the crown of our outing was our midnight ride, side by side, on the top of another omnibus, going deviously northward toward Tufnell Park.

It was a fair, moon-lit night, still and warm. She wore a blue linen dress and a big broad-brimmed hat trimmed with corn-flowers, and an immensely

long scarf of white lace wound about and about her neck and shoulders. Very beautiful she appeared in the pearly light of the electric arc-lamps as we drifted along through the traffic, with the mimic world of infinitely lesser humans spread out below us for our entertainment, like a puppet-show on a vast stage, viewed from the dress-circle. The crowd was shrouded in the shadowy veil of the overhanging houses that shut out the remoter, brighter sky, and ravished by shifting shafts of brilliance that shot in and out amid the press, touching a face here and there and causing it to shine out, vivid and quick with burning significance, and set like a flower of flame in the midst of a blinding cloud of drab smoke.

But as we turned into the home-street a change came over the spirit of our dreams. We no longer felt aloof from the mean concerns of every-day, but twitteringly aware of the hard untowardliness of the common worldly attitude toward all such as we had daringly aspired to be. I looked at my companion and saw that her face had become abruptly harsh and downcast and lowering. She turned to me with a twitch of the delicate nostril and a lift of the lip, and said with one of her periodic lapses into wanton vulgarity that were always so inexpressibly painful to me to hear:

"Mother 'll jaw my head off. You see." Then,



after a haggard pause, "When we get in, will you please go straight upstairs to your room? And, whatever happens, take no notice. Will you? Promise me."

I promised her. The glamour that had suffused her personality all that day was cruelly dispelled. I felt cold, sick, disgusted, as if I had been threatened with some foul affront.

With my aid she forced open the protesting broken gate; and then preceded me down the steep stone steps to the basement-area. Even as her hand touched the door it was flung open and I saw the face of the Scapegrace Mother framed in the blackness beyond like a livid mask of fury.

"Fine goings on!" she began, in a high strained voice.

Rosetta seemed to shrink. "Hush!" she breathed.

"Oh, I mean Mr. Smallpiece to hear," Mrs. Conover cried out, in yet more strident tones. "Mr. Smallpiece is a gentleman, whatever you may consider yourself to be."

But I pushed past her roughly and fled upstairs, stumbling in the dark over I know not what unseen obstacles.

I shut myself in my bedroom and tried not to listen to the sound of their voices. That was quite vain. At first I heard only Mrs. Conover's voice: Rosetta was obviously maintaining a stubborn si-

lence. The voice of the Scapegrace Mother rose and fell and flowed on and on and burst into shrill freshets of cumulative insult (as I gathered) tirelessly, tediously, monotonously. It seemed to toss on a restless sea of wordiness like spume. . . . That was the picture it suggested to my tortured mind: the picture of a dreary dark stormy sea breaking on a slimy foreshore, running swiftly up narrow creeks and spending itself in hissing foam against the base of cliffs. I have already recorded that I often think in pictures; I have a curious faculty of visualising actual happenings in allegories of colour and form and movement. All sights and sounds and scents take on visible symbols in my mind. All emotions evoke visions of strange scenes and happenings such I have perhaps never beheld with my bodily eyes.

I remember, as a distinct sensation, shuddering and quailing as the welter of words rose higher and higher, as if the waves were threatening me, and gasping when they rose to a crescendo of vituperation as if a cold cataclysm had broken over my head. I sat there shivering and catching my breath convulsively all the while that senseless altercation lasted.

It ended abruptly. I heard Rosetta's voice speaking hurriedly and feverishly, in staccato measure, and then there was a sudden stillness, followed by sounds of flurried movement, a swift thudding of



feet across the floor, a sharp angry cry, a bump and scuffle as of two people desperately struggling, the flinging open of a door, a rush and scurry of flying footsteps on hollow boards, a rasping and grating of a refractory lock.

My bedroom overlooked the street. I stood at the window, gazing down at the dimly-lit purview of grey pavement and grey road. Immediately below the level of my eyes was a Scotch laburnum, its cluster of yellow blossoms hanging in the glare of a gas-lamp hard by like gorgeous candelabra. Insensibly, my imagination wove a similitude between the natural splendour of those golden cups and the grouped globes of the lights of the exhibition-grounds wherein Rosetta and I had lately sat together. In the short interval that elapsed between the opening of the door in the basement and the time it took Rosetta to climb to the top of the precipitous area-steps, I had conjured up a wondrous panorama of dissolving views out of all that had passed during our happy jaunt that day. But the passing show was rudely switched aside by the rough hand of reality and darkly eclipsed by the sight of Rosetta herself struggling peevishly with the "impracticable" outer gate, and presently letting herself out with a disdainful shake of her petticoats, and then walking rapidly away from the shelter of her only home. She was gone. And the house was distressfully filled with

the wailing of her mother's voice, upraised in passionable lamentation.

I have only the vaguest recollections of my tempestuous passage downstairs. As in a glass darkly I recall the figure of Mrs. Conover intercepting me and snatching at my sleeve and pouring forth a torrent of entreaty and instruction as I dashed past her along the narrow dark passage in which she was rocketing about distractedly. I remember that the whole house above-stairs seemed in a state of commotion as I darted out at the open door and went my headlong way, stumbling up the steps, in pursuit of Rosetta. Then I was out in the gloomy, deserted street with a sense upon me of having dived into deep cold waters, through which I breasted my way, running hard on lagging feet over the echoing flags.

I overtook Rosetta before she had gone a hundred yards. As soon as she heard the patter of my feet on the pavement behind her she stopped dead and wheeled about and waited for me to come up with her. I was, between my agitation and my haste, quite winded and for a moment could not speak, but only lay my detaining hand on her arm as if I would hold her back from some imminent catastrophe against her will. She stood gazing at me with her heavy straight brows meeting in a knot of puckers across the bridge of her nose.



"I am never going back," she said.

"You—must," I panted.

"Never."

"It's your home. I won't—let you—go."

"If we stand still, here," she said, "we shall have the whole wretched tribe at our heels in a minute. And then there will be a public scene."

I nodded, fell into step beside her, and we hurried on.

"But this is madness, simply," I told her. "You must go back. What else can you do?"

"My plans have been made a long time," she replied. "It is awkward that it should have happened like this—in the middle of the night. But it was bound to happen sooner or later. My patience has been worn too thin, and might have snapped any day this six months past. I am glad it has happened. Yes, I am. Glad. Though ——"

"But what are you going to do?" I asked her again.

"What is a girl to do?" she said. "Oh, that is all right. Easy enough. I shall do what thousands of other girls have done. Live in lodgings, of course. There will be no difficulty whatever about that."

"But—at this hour!"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I shall walk about all night," she said. "I can look after myself."

"No. I will look after you," said I. "Let me, won't you?"

For a moment she hesitated, then she said: "Thank you, Ferdinand." And then: "It is very good of you. I suppose you have sisters of your own, somewhere?"

"I never had either sister or brother."

"What a pity! How you have been wasted!"

"Nor mother, nor father," I went on. "My mother died when I was only a few months old. I was brought up by an aunt, not very kindly."

"Ah, tell me some more about yourself," she said. "That is, if you care to, of course."

The moon made all things holy. The aspect of the jerry-built streets was magically tranformed into a semblance of some city of enchantments. A silky mist mingled with the darkness and illumed it. The slated roofs lay under the cold rays as if they had been bathed in a silver flood. The chimneys with their fantastic cowls were edged and gilded as with the dust of fairy's wings, pale and lustrous. And the profound sky was a sea of visions, a lake of deep imaginings, in which the firmamental hosts rode bright and clear like flickering, floating beacons, a legion of lesser lights in the train of the majestic resplendent moon that hung from the translucent blue like a lamp of pearl. The shrubs in the little front-gardens and the tall trees lifting their heads



above the house-tops, shimmered and glimmered in the mystic glow as if each leaf had been a crystal patine. It was a dead, deserted city in which we moved, two spectral figures, as we had been the last survivors of the human race, alone and infinitely small under the argent light of Heaven.

We went our way through the long straight avenues, heavily bordered with foliage, across the empty main thoroughfare where the tram-lines glistened on the grey road like the iridescent trails of a serpentine progress. The shops, all shuttered and grim, stood frowning at one another across the broad way like enemies asleep at their posts. On one side they loomed vague and nebulous, pricked out with ghostly cabalistics; on the other they were revealed in all the tawdry banality of vulgar device and shabby effrontery. But the mystery and the magic of the nocturnal glamour had reduced them to their right insignificance: they seemed as mere toys of restless children, set up as part of a silly game, and now abandoned and left to the stark indifference of the night, thus to stand unheeded till the morning.

"I am not a Cockney, you know," was the first thing I told Rosetta. "I was born in Witney, in Oxfordshire, where the blankets come from."

"Wet blankets?" she inquired, with a quizzical smile.

"What do you mean?" I said, a little piqued.

"Never mind. Go on."

"I was a posthumous child. And a few months after my regrettable birth my mother died, too. It was then that I drifted into the care of her sister, the aunt I spoke of. She fetched me up to London at once. Here I was brought up, in an old-maid's household. But she wasn't the type of old-maid that one likes to think of as simple and kindly and self-devoted, occupying herself with arduous unpleasant duties, making things for the poor, and helping the local curate in his parish work. She wasn't at all that type of woman. She was a frivolous, worldly person, with a small private income of her own, which she supplemented by teaching music and dancing, and acting as pianoforte accompanist at concerts—rather disreputable concerts, some of them. She was a woman who always had a host of admirers in her train. She had ideas of her own, as she used to put it. She wasn't going to live the life of a wax-flower under a glass-shade. She was alive—very much alive—and steadily resolved to absorb all the available elements of joy that were in the air. A hard, cynical woman, who spoke of love and men and all that sort of thing in the disdainful way that certain women, who have missed the ulterior meaning of their womanhood, do sometimes speak of such matters. She was undoubtedly very handsome in a flaunting,

flamboyant style: big and inclined to be corpulent, with a very red and white face and a mass of flaxen hair. I remember, as a distinctive peculiarity of hers, that she always seemed physically cold. The touch of her hand used to chill me, as if it had been made of stone. She laughed a great deal, but I never saw her smile. She was very contemptuous of all weakness of whatsoever kind, even the pathetic weakness of a child. If I hurt myself, and cried, she scowled and jeered at me. 'Yes, you will be a man right enough, some day,' she used to remark. 'They all consider themselves so brave and strong; and they are always ready to cry out if a flea bites them.' That was quite a characteristic utterance of hers.

"I feel that I can hardly hope to make you understand in the least what sort of a life it was I spent with her. It was so off the usual beat. . . . So far as feeding me and clothing me and seeing that I was properly educated she was exemplary. She looked after my material welfare as few mothers, handicapped as they are by their natural affections can perhaps be expected to look after that side of their children's interests. But she was at considerable pains—she went out of her way—to impress on me that there was no scintilla of sentiment involved in her attitude toward my up-bringing. I suppose she had, concealed somewhere underneath the surface of her unsympathetic nature, a secret very rigid

sense of duty toward me. All the same I swear that she had no more love for me than she had respect for convention?'"

"You can't be sure, though," said Rosetta, musingly. "And how do you mean—'respect for convention'?"

"Ah, yes; I was just coming to that. . . . We lived near the Tottenham Court Road, on an upper floor, in three rooms: one very big, the other two very small. One of the small rooms was my aunt's bedroom, the other was allotted to me, to eat and sleep and play in, when I was at home. I very rarely entered the big room, in which my aunt gave her lessons and received her guests of an evening. Her guests were mostly men, for though she affected to despise men she was always free to confess that they were much more amusing and easy to get on with than women. But she invited women, too—two or three, as a rule—to help to keep the men in good humour and also to play propriety to one another, I suppose.

"The women were all rough, hard, loud creatures like my aunt on whom they founded and modelled themselves. They were, I think, all actresses or connected in some way with the theatre. They painted their faces, and dyed their hair, and smelt overpoweringly of various cloying perfumes and unguents, and were generally offensive to a child's

delicate senses. Very occasionally they took notice of me, but only when my aunt happened not to be present; they petted and fondled me, but in a boisterous gross way that I resented; and the kisses that they showered on me—fierce, hot, moist, horrible kisses—were so abominable to me that I dreaded them beyond expression, and would turn tail and run away to escape them. But I was venal as most children are. And so I suffered them gladly at such times as I could overcome my repugnance, because they were very lavish in the way of giving me cakes and sweets and toys and even silver for my pocket. Only they had to do all that kind of thing on the sly. For my aunt was most careful that I should not be spoilt, or even damaged, by any silly indiscriminate over-indulgence."

"Was your aunt what they call 'quite respectable'?" asked Rosetta, puckering her brows and speaking rather as if to herself than to me.

I blushed at the odd, slightly indelicate question. "Oh, yes," I assured her. "Quite respectable." And then I was suddenly beset with painful new misgivings on the subject, that opened up illimitable vistas of conjecture before me. "Oh, I think so," I said earnestly. "I am pretty sure she was. Though of course —— Certainly she was a little too fond of wine and cards, and going to the theatre—or it may have been the music-hall—and to dances, and all that

sort of thing. I remember that I was often kept awake very late at night by the sounds of their revelry in the big room. And other nights I was woke up in the small hours, out of my first sleep, by the noise of her home-coming in the company of a lot more roisterers. But it was," I repeated, "a sort of life very difficult to describe."

"I think you describe it very well," said Rosetta.

"Do you really?—Well, when I was eight or nine years old I was packed off to a boarding-school a little way out of London, in the neighbourhood of Epping Forest. And there I stayed till I was sixteen. And during all that time I saw my aunt only very rarely. That is to say, she hardly ever visited the school, and I used to spend all my vacations there. Oh, I preferred that! My aunt's dislike of me was heartily reciprocated on my side. Yes. I think I almost hated her.

"She died when I was about sixteen. By that time we had become virtually strangers. She wrote to me pretty regularly; but I had not seen her for nearly two years when I received the news of her death. I remember that I tried to feel sorry, or shocked any way, and failed, and was rather frightened at finding myself so devoid of all sensibility. For though she had never been in the least tender or fond, she had really been most kind to me."

"I believe that is how I should feel if my mother



died," said Rosetta; "though, of course, she has never been kind to any of her children in any way. She has always been a horror—— I wonder what sort of boy you were."

"Oh, you tempt me beyond my strength!" I cried.

"I'm sure you weren't an ordinary boy."

"No. I wasn't a bit like any of the other boys at that school at Waltham." I paused. "I hate boys," I added violently. "I don't know much about little girls ——"

"They are quite beastly, too" interjected Rosetta.

"I daresay they are. Boys are I know. The average boy, I mean. The only sort I have ever met; and boys are horribly alike—superficially anyhow. And that is why I can never make out why there is so much glorification of the schoolboy spirit. As if boys were the exemplars of the race! whereas, the schoolboy is a mean, dirty, cowardly, slothful, cruel, greedy little atavist, really. The average boy is the worst snob in the world, besides. And he is also unspeakably nasty in word, thought, and habit.—I beg your pardon.—Well, I wasn't that kind of boy—unfortunately for my happiness at that time. I was a highly-strung, sensitive, imaginative, gentle, affectionate child." I laughed scornfully. "I don't mind saying these things to you, Rosetta; because you are a woman and may understand.

But I wouldn't confess half as much to any man. And, of course, I suffered—suffered terribly. I don't mean that they bullied me, knocked me about, you know. I had too much contempt for the other boys, every one of them, to be afraid of anything they could do to me. And it is quite safe to say that nine boys out of ten are abjectly afraid of any other boy who is obviously not a bit afraid of them. They are like the barnyard cock till it sees a cat. They strut and crow and fluff themselves out, and look big, and flap their wing ferociously—and a small determined, fearless little beastie, no bigger than themselves, comes walking easily and carelessly toward them and—presto!—they are scuttling off and rending the air with their outcries as fast as their terror and their legs and their breathless haste will let them. That is very like a boy. And the moment you realise that you are safe from their tyranny. But you can never save yourself from the clinging offensiveness of the atmosphere they create by their mere presence on the earth, unless you remove yourself very far away from all association with them. And I did that, just as often as ever I could. I used to break bounds—risk all sorts of penalties and punishment and disgrace—to be quit of them. I would take a book and slip away into the woods, not always to read, but often to idle and dream my time away under the trees, or beside some



quiet pool. That was in the summer time, of course. In the winter I used to take refuge in the servants' quarters and sit with the domestics, the pleasant-faced maids and the gruff taciturn men, who all liked me and thought me a fine fellow indeed, and whom I found a vastly more interesting and sympathetic circle of acquaintance than I was likely to pick up in any other part of the school-house, even among the wearily superior upper-sixth fellows."

"But—servants!" exclaimed Rosetta, opening her eyes wide and looking faintly disgusted.

I stared back at her, greatly surprised at her tone of lofty scorn.

"Why!" I said. "I thought you claimed to be a thorough democrat, Rosetta. You have often told me ——"

"Yes, I know. Never mind about the servants. Go on. Were you a clever boy?"

"I got on all right with my lessons. I was considered rather lazy and dilatory. But if I was really either—and I daresay I was—well, I knew there wasn't any use in being otherwise. I should only have had to wait for the dullards to catch up if I'd been industrious."

"It's just the same in the Board Schools and the Training Colleges now," said Rosetta. "And what happened after your aunt died?"

"I had to leave school— I didn't mind that. I

went back to Witney. For I discovered, what it would have broken my heart with longing to have found out sooner, that there were people in Witney just dying to adopt me as their son for my father's sake. There were old friends of his. And uncles and aunts and cousins of mine. Dozens of them. For my grandfather had raised a prodigious family. Seventeen or eighteen—I forget which—sons and daughters. And they had all married and had large families, too, so that I had at least fifty cousins. And there wasn't one of them that wouldn't have taken me in gladly. You see, they were Quakers. My grandfather was really a famous man—for a Quaker. A renegade, I'm afraid, since he was, among other things, a musician. He had played the church organ, been bandmaster in the local yeomanry. And, it was said, he could get music out of any instrument in wood or brass or string that was ever invented; that he had only to have a new instrument placed in his hands, though he might never have seen or heard of it before, to draw from it such sweet strains, at the first trial, as eclipsed all previous performances upon it. He was a watch and clockmaker by trade. His clock still tells the time in the market-place. He was really, by all accounts, a most wonderful man. He must have been something of a genius. . . . He had been dead some few years before I was born, for my father had been the

last child of his old age. But his name and his fame still endured in Witney; and he was always spoken of with a deep, loving respect that I found very grateful and comforting to myself.

"I went to stay with my Uncle Benjamin, a man almost as remarkable as my grandfather in his way. He had spent his youth in reckless adventure, had served as soldier and sailor in half a dozen different armies and navies, and coming home and marrying and settling down at last, had taken out his certificate as a solicitor in his fiftieth year, and a year later had been made Town Clerk."

"I had no idea your people were such overwhelming swells, Ferdinand," Rosetta remarked, in a tone of mockery.

"Swells? Oh, no. They were quite simple country people. Millers and small farmers and various kinds of handicraftsmen. All hardy, easy-going folk, you know, and all fairly well-to-do in an unambitious plodding way. And all of them happily married, with each a tribe of sturdy, rosy children.

"I went into my Uncle Benjamin's office, as clerk. There was some talk of my being articled to him. But I soon found I wasn't fitted for the life of a lawyer. And Uncle Ben didn't attempt the forlorn task of persuading a young man against his will. So I just stayed on with him as his clerk, having a pretty good time, till he died, about three years ago.

And then, following my inclinations, I came to London, and after a few months of idleness, which I mis-called 'looking about me,' sought and found a job in Keogh & Maw's office, where I met your father, and where, I suppose, I shall stay until—until ——"

"Until?" queried Rosetta curiously.

"Well," said I, "I don't propose to be merely a solicitor's clerk all my life, you know."

"What, then?" asked Rosetta.

"I—I'm going to be an author," I said. "Didn't you know?"

She was silent for a space. "Is that what you get up so early every morning for—to write?" she asked at length.

"Yes. But how did you know I got up early?"

"I sleep in the room next to yours. I hear you moving about."

"I'm sorry, Rosetta. I always try to be as quiet as possible."

"You are very quiet. You would not wake me up."

"But it seems that I do wake you up."

"No, you don't," she said. "I always get up early too. I'm trying to improve my French. I'm translating *La Tenebreuse.* Do you know it? Georges Ohnet's."

"I wish I had known that you were up," slipped from my lips.



"But why?"

I was confused. "It—it would have inspired me," I faltered.

She laughed, then became suddenly grave. "Ah, no," she said. "Don't let us talk any of that nonsense, Ferdinand. . . . Didn't you say that your aunt had a private income? What became of her property when she died?"

"It passed to me."

She seemed suddenly galvanised into new life. She clutched the lapel of my coat, bent forward, and peered up into my face.

"Really?" she exclaimed.

"Yes," I replied, disagreeably affected by the sight of her strange agitation. "It amounts to very little."

She released her grasp of me. Her head drooped. She clasped her hands tightly before her. "A private income!" I heard her whisper. "A private income. Oh . . . !"

"You seem to be a great deal more excited about it than I ever was," I remarked, endeavouring to speak lightly.

"Oh, yes," she said. "You have grown up familiar with the idea of a private income. You don't know —you can't conceive—what the mere phrase means to a beggarly person like me."

"What does it mean?"

"It means," she said, raising her voice, so that her clear tones rang and echoed through the darkness; "it means everything I ask for."

"Then you don't ask for very much," I ventured, very discomposed.

"I ask for this," she said, clutching my coat again. "I ask for just enough money to keep body and soul together. Just enough money, stored away where it can't be stolen or lost or take wing—just enough to provide for me till I die, to buy me the bare necessaries of life, so that I should never have to face utter destitution, so that I should always feel really free. Free to do as I liked, to be what I chose, to speak my mind, superior to all the poor needs of the body, the equal of any living creature. A private income means absolute freedom. It means enough to exist on, whatever happens. It means that you are not a slave, never can be a slave. For the lack of just that so-much a week, of that round sum sufficient to provide you with board and lodging and raiment, we are all slaves, except a fortunate few.

"Take my case. I earn about two pounds a week, under Government. My wages will slowly increase until I am sixty, when I can retire—if I live so long and don't disgrace myself in the meantime—on a pension. My future seems pretty secure, then. And it is—so long as I do as I am told, so



long as I keep my mouth shut, so long as I order myself lowly and reverently toward my betters, so long as I am willing to acquiesce in things as I find them, whether I approve of them or not. But let me protest against any injustice or hardship in any conspicuous fashion—let me but say 'This shall not be! I will not submit to it,' and what becomes of Rosetta Conover? Out she goes—into the gutter. I am no more free, in spite of my calling, in spite of the honours and the position to which I have won, in spite of my seeming security, in spite of my talents and grit, than if I were a Babylonian captive. Or not much more free. And a paltry ten shillings a week would make me free for life. I should be able to be myself, if I had ten shillings a week. I need call no man or woman or board or council my master, then. O, you lucky, lucky people!—ye salt of the earth!—who possess ten shillings a week!"

These words she uttered with what seemed to me such extravagant vehemence that I could hardly believe, at first, that she did not speak in a sort of wild jest. It all seemed so much too much ado about next to nothing. But one glimpse of her face—a face in which the baser and nobler elements of her nature seemed ever struggling together for supreme expression—made it impossible to disbelieve that she was wholly and intensely sincere.

"You don't know what a settled income means to

a woman like me," she said, in softer tones. "I am a fool to get so excited. I ought to apologise ——"

"No——"

"But I wont. —— See! the sky is beginning to show signs of the dawn already!"

During our talk we had left the town behind us and were now out upon the wild heights of Hampstead. The moon had swiftly sunk into a bank of deep purple haze that lay along the distant horizon like a mountain-range whose peaks were veiled in diaphanous cloud. Now, in the East, the advancing heralds of the morn were hanging out their pale banners on the battlemented sky. There was a luminous faint glory of liquid gold that was like the tip of an incoming wave advancing insidiously up a steep smooth fore-shore in a pale after-glow of sunset. In the zenith the stars still burned like wasting fires, dimly lighting the world beneath with pallid gleams. A soughing wind had arisen and went sighing across the open country as if the giant Earth breathed heavily and troublously in his sleep, and stirred his sluggish limbs and tossed his shaggy locks, and then composed his lusty form again to slumber.

We came out upon the Spaniards Road, upstanding on a sandy ridge above the broken wilderness,

broad and white and straight as a lance, and fringed on either hand in a mystery of low-growing brake and bracken, with here and there an overtopping cluster of young trees. To the north a world-famous clump of pines, beloved of poets and painters, stood on a flat shelf of mossy ground like the ragged gaunt spectres of dead forest-monarchs. Beyond, the land fell sharply away into a steep valley that seemed to melt in space.

"I think I should like to rest for a bit," said Rosetta.

And then I saw that she was dropping with fatigue.

We sat down on one of the sun-flayed wooden benches set along the raised side-walk; and she leaned back and folded her hands in her lap and closed her eyes. And it was as if, with the closing of her eyes, the light and the strength of her companionship, which had borne me up through the night, failed me suddenly and left me infinitely weary too, so that I ached and shuddered with the burden of supporting my own body. Obeying some vague irresistible impulse, I groped for and seized her hand. It lay in mine, inert and cold and unresponsive; and then I saw that she had instantly fallen asleep. She was sleeping like a child that knows no care, reposing perfect trust in the care of those appointed to be her guardians and protectors. Her

face had taken on an unusual wistful beauty of softness and peace. The hard firm lines of her mouth and chin and brow had lost their look of precocious self-reliance and were made gracious and youthful and appealing. A warm flood of tenderness and pity gushed up in my breast and kindled me to a very passion of love that had in it no least taint of any gross or carnal element, but was fresh from that fount of chivalry which is to be struck by the rod of pity out of the rock of all fresh young souls not yet overlaid with cynicism. I felt that I would have liked nothing better than to have died for her and with her in that hour.

A moment, it seemed, and then it was the peep of day.

Foreglow of dawn was coming up, out of the profound East, golden as hope. London lay afar off, under its glittering host of sentinel lights, like a fairy city suspended midway between earth and heaven. A drowsy content fell upon me, in which I fancied that I sat on the shores of a narrow sea, at the bottom of a precipitous gulf; and between the city and the farther shore was a stretch of old wild territory, moor and heath, ending at the edge of a tall cliff. Patches of yellow flower, shining like some wintry fire, flecked the misty green of the vegetation. Bare rocks, fantastically wrought by storm and time, were scattered madly over the

desolate expanse; boulders that my somnolent fancy transformed into forms and faces of elves and imps and gnomes, into ghastly grey heads, hideously scarred, with wind-tossed hair of thorns and glistening spurs of jagged stone, protruding tusk-like from the moss-bearded lips.

The scene was a magic playground for the creatures of my dreamful imaginings. The brisk air stirred my hot blood through my dulled senses, clogged with sleep. The distant city, under its gem-pricked canopy of blue, was a vast treasure-house of glad visions. I sat with blinking eyelids revelling in the ultimate prospect. The earth seemed to breathe and rock with rich promise of life-joys unspeakable in that wizard hour of dawn.

I started, awoke.

The air smelt good and cold under its blanket of grey mist, and the rocks, which were no rocks but little sand-dunes crowned with coarse herbage, shone prismatic as icicles. Low down and ever growing was a faint crimson glow, peach-bloom where it melted into the sky, that spread and swelled like a note of music, long-drawn-out, until it filled the air with melodious colour. Then the mist was riven and rent and ghostly forms and faces came into it and voices that whispered and laughed and sang. The sun peered over the edge of the world and poked a golden finger at me, whereat the rippling grass and

the quivering slender trees rejoiced and danced to the mingled music of their voices. Then the light blinked drowsily, and for a moment it was sadly dark. The flickering, vanishing phantoms massed thick, grew bold again, and the whole grassy sea shivered. An instant, and the light was bright once more upon the billowy scape; the grey wraiths were fleeing upward, pell-mell, writhing in torment. It was day.

For three hours Rosetta slept soundly; and during all that time—which I would not have had shortened by the least fraction of a second—I sat beside her, holding watch and ward, feeling like a knight-errant with his drawn sword in his hand, defending his fair lady's honour. At last she awoke, rubbed her eyes with her knuckles with winning childish abandon, and looked about her with a gaze of wonder.

"Oh, Ferdinand!" she cried; "what have we done!"

"What?" I inquired, smiling.

She seemed panic-stricken by a new woeful consciousness of irrevocable doom.

"Don't you understand?" she exclaimed, a note of petulance making her voice hoarse and harsh. "Are you really so stupid?"

"Stupid?" I repeated stupidly.



"Yes, yes," she said fretfully. "Do think! Don't look so owlishly innocent! We have been out all night—together!"

Then I began dimly to perceive the enormity of the wrong we had committed, and its far-reaching consequences for us both.

"It doesn't matter," I said sturdily. "I am glad. We shall have to get married now. That's all."

I was numbed with astonishment at my own calmness in the face of this momentous crisis. But I was simply honest in saying that I was glad. Gladness was my predominant emotion at that moment; and it was an emotion so intense and consuming that it left no room for any other.

She shot a swift glance at me and her frowning face was suffused with blushes.

"But I didn't want it to happen like this," she murmured. "I don't think—I don't feel—that I want to marry you—yet."

"I cannot think, either. What is the use? But I can feel, and it is enough for you as well. Don't you love me?" I asked her humbly.

She seemed—it was a habit of hers that I have already mentioned—to turn some weighty matter over in her mind, gravely, deliberately. Very wise and thoughtful she looked, now that the pink colour had drained away out of her cheeks, leaving them paler than their wont.

"Will you marry me, Rosetta?" I demanded.

"Oh, I don't know!" she, cried distressfully.

"I love you, Rosetta! How I love you, dear!"

"But I'm afraid—I am almost sure—I don't love you, Ferdinand."

"If you are not quite sure ——"

"I like you—tremendously."

"That must suffice, then, for the present," I faltered.

"I think you are good and kind. You would take care of me."

"I would fill your life with happiness, if it is in any man's power to do so," I assured her, in the usual way.

"Yes. I believe you would do all that is possible to—to ——"

I leaned toward her. My arm crept about her waist. But she shrank away.

"Oh, no!" she said. "I don't want you to do that."

I was discomfited. "But if we are to be married—?" I urged.

"Yes," she said. "Only I haven't got used to the idea of that yet." Her mouth quivered piteously. "I—I don't want to be taken by storm, Ferdinand."

I felt rather a brute. I felt that I had her at a cruel disadvantage, and that I was using the power

which accident had placed in my hands like a coward, not at all as the knight-errant would have used it.

"I am very sorry. Forgive me, Rosetta," I mumbled.

"Let us walk," she said, putting up her hands and fumbling with her hair; and the characteristically feminine act gave me a thrilling poignant sense of complete intimacy. "I am cold—stiff—cramped. My head seems floating about, miles away from the rest of me. . . . Oh, that I should have let myself fall asleep like that! I must have looked loathsome. People always do when they are asleep in their clothes."

We rose and descended slowly into London.

An hour later we were entering a tall, new, red-brick house in Hornsey, where dwelt one of Rosetta's fellow-teachers, a girl of her own age, named Ella Candlish. Miss Candlish rented a small flat, containing three rooms, on the fifth floor . . . which was providential, since we could get at her without first having to overcome the prejudices and suspicions of any landlady.

"You had better go to the end of the passage, Ferdinand," said Rosetta before she knocked. "Miss Candlish may very likely be in bed."

And it was as Rosetta had foreseen. From my

coign of observation at a lofty window I saw the outer door of the flat open cautiously, and a dishevelled head peep out. There were shrill exclamations, speedily hushed, and then a rapid, whispered colloquy. A white arm shot out and grasped Rosetta's sleeve and drew her within the threshold. As she vanished she threw a backward glance over her shoulder at me; and then the door closed with a reverberating slam.

Five—ten—twenty minutes—half an hour—forty minutes passed, and my weariness so grew upon me that I dozed as I stood, lolling against the wall. Then Rosetta came out and beckoned me.

"Miss Candlish wishes you to stay to breakfast," she said.

One of the frequent fits of shyness to which I am painfully subject assailed me. "I—I would rather not," I protested feebly.

"You must," Rosetta insisted. "You look dreadfully pale and tired and haggard."

"That does not reassure me much," I said lugubriously.

"You must be aching in every limb, too. And ravenously hungry, no doubt. I know I am. And Ella is a sweet girl. She perfectly understands. You are bound to like her."

"What are you saying about me, Rose?" inquired a girl's fluty voice; and Miss Candlish herself appeared in the tiny hall.

She was a small, dark girl, not very pretty, with sharp restless eyes and a button-hole mouth. But her face was good to look at, because it was eloquent of lively good-humour and extreme kindliness.

"I am just telling Mr. Smallpiece the truth about you," said Rosetta.

"That would sound most alarming," said the sprightly Miss Candlish, showing her small white teeth, "if you were anybody else. But I am not a bit afraid, because one's friends never do know the truth about one. How could they, and be our friends! Do come in, Mr. Smallpiece, and let me find you a cushiony chair."

So I went in; and in five minutes was devouring bacon and eggs.

It was rather a solemn meal. We discussed Rosetta's affairs from every conceivable point of view, exhaustively, with all due gravity and also with the gusto that youth invariably evinces in settling any vital human problem. We were very wise and staid and sober-minded. In the end it was arranged that Rosetta should share Miss Candlish's flat, for a time, at least. I was entrusted with the onerous office of intermediary between Rosetta

and her family, and also undertook to transport such of her belongings as she had immediate need of to her new domicile. Then, promising to call later that day and to report progress, I took leave of them.

I carried a busy brain and a heart that fluctuated between joy and sadness back to Tufnell Park.



CHAPTER III

POINTS OF VIEW

As I entered the street in which the Conovers lived I saw the scapegrace mother standing at the gate. She cried out in an agitated voice at sight of me, and at once her tears began to flow. Already her face was grey and sodden with weeping; and I could see plainly that she too had kept an all-night vigil.

"Where is she?" she gasped.

"She is quite safe," I answered.

"But—where?"

"She doesn't want you to know where she is staying at present."

"Oh, the wicked girl! the wicked girl! The mother I've always been to her, too!"

I felt some faint stirrings of pity for Mrs. Conover. Graceless and repulsive as she was, it seemed that there were still the battered remnants of a mother's heart in her, after all.

"Come in," she said. "I've been running in and

out ever since she went off. Why didn't you make her come back?"

I shrugged my shoulders. There seemed to be no necessity for me to attempt to answer such an exceedingly foolish question.

In the front room in the basement the whole family was assembled. They had all been crying a good deal. They were now unusually repressed and silent. Even Mr. Conover's eyes were red, and he sniffed at intervals. All the windy self-sufficiency was clean gone out of him. He started up as I entered, struck a dramatic attitude, passed his hand wearily across his forehead.

"At last!" he exclaimed. "What news of my poor, misguided child, Mr. Smallpiece?"

"She is all right. Quite comfortable," I said casually. "But I am really too tired to talk much just now. I must go and lie down."

"One question I must ask, however; and, that answered, I will no longer endeavour to thwart your natural craving for rest. Is Rosetta coming back?"

"No."

He covered his face with his hands and sank back in his chair with a quavering groan.

"Go!" he muttered. "I have learnt the worst. I can bear no more. Go, please."

I went, very willingly, glad to be out of sight of their sickly theatrical display of grief. I left them



staring at one another in a moody silence, punctuated by sobs, and went upstairs to my own apartment, where, having first divested myself of my outer garments and laved my hands and face in some soapy water which stood in my basin, I flung myself down on the coverlet of my bed, and, after a feverish interval of tormenting reflection, fell fast asleep.

I slept until the evening, when I was aroused by the creeping sounds of a stealthy presence in my room; and rolling over on my side discovered Amelia with a tray, on which was a cup of tea and some biscuits. The Conovers never went to the trouble of cutting bread and butter if they could avoid it. There were always biscuits.

"It's just gone six," said Amelia. "I thought you might not like to sleep any longer. I knocked at your door; but you was that sound you didn't hear."

"Thank you." I got upon my feet.

She set down the tray on a rickety chair, noisily and clumsily, spilling the tea over the biscuits, which she had not thought to put on a plate.

"Now I've made a muck—drat it!" she said viciously. She wiped up the mess with her apron, perfunctorily. Then she turned to me and assumed a cringing pose that she may have designed to be seductive. "Won't you tell me about Rosetta, Mr. Smallpiece?" she said. "I wouldn't let on to any of the others—not one word, I wouldn't."

"She asked me not to tell any of you anything."

Amelia flounced away from me, bridling. "Oh, very well!" she snapped out. She hesitated. "But what are you going to do about it, Mr. Smallpiece?" she demanded, with a heavy emphasis on the personal pronoun.

I was rather at a loss. "What do you mean?" I said stiffly.

"You know well enough. You'll have to make everything right and proper, of course."

"Still, I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, you're a precious innocent gaby, you are!" She eyed me with sullen animosity. "There's the neighbours. They know all about it, you may be sure."

"How?"

"Why, they must have heard the row, mustn't they? They're an awful inquisitive lot. No doubt they were all peering and prying out o' their winders when she run away and you after her. It'll make it simply 'orrible for me. I shall never be able to hold up my head again. None of us won't."

The notion of Amelia ever holding up her head, either in the literal or metaphorical sense, was a thought too ludicrous for serious consideration as a factor in the family tragedy. I smiled. She saw the smile and resented it. Her heavy face flushed darkly.

"It's all very fine for you to grin!" she cried angrily. "But you'll have to marry her now; that's what it comes to, Mr. Smallpiece."

Amelia had, until that moment, inspired me only with a feeling of shrinking disgust; but now I felt that I loathed her. I advanced toward her fuming in my rage. She stood her ground with insolent self-possession. I could only turn away, then, with the same sort of glance that I would have bestowed on some unclean, bloated insect.

"Ah, you can't bluster with me," she cried. "I ain't afraid of you. Ah, you beast! You've taken away her good name. Yes, you may laugh. It don't matter to you. But we're a respectable family, thank God!"

Out of the limbo of my memory there flashed upon me a half-forgotten passage of Genesis: "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them". Even this nasty sex-perversion was His handiwork! And she was thanking Him for the blessing of her existence. The thought moved me to secret sorry mirth. Mingled with my past dislike of Amelia there was now a tinge of rapture in my realisation of her as a stupendous joke—a wicked cruel joke, perpetrated by the Almighty in a fit of ghastly sportiveness. I felt that if I spoke to her again I must insult her by laughing outright in her face. And I

did not, in my heart, want to hurt the susceptibilities of the forlorn unfortunate creature, who, no doubt, was no more to blame for her unlovely nature than is an ape for its inherent lack of all sense of decency. But—the respectability of the Conovers!

"I see you've got nothing to say for yourself," she went on tempestuously. "You've disgraced her, and she's disgraced us; and now I suppose you'll just clear out and snap your fingers at us and leave us to face it all by ourselves. Ugh! The others have all arranged to butter you up. But that's not my style. I wouldn't lower myself to any man, least of all to you. I'm honest, if I ain't pretty!"

"Amelia!"

It was the voice of her father, calling to her from the landing outside my room.

"Ah, there's par," she said. "A fine oily one, par is. He'll smooth you down, if anybody can. But I've said my say. And whatever happens, nobody can't unsay it for me."

"Amelia! Are you there?"

Mr. Conover's knuckles rapped on the door.

"I'm coming, par."

And she turned away. As she left me her father entered.

"Pardon this intrusion," he said, having carefully shut Amelia out and waited until the sound of her

receding footsteps died away. "But—I am a parent, Mr. Smallpiece."

"So I've always understood," I said; but he was, as ever, utterly incapable of feeling the sting of my gibe.

"I am a father, with a father's sacred instincts, Mr. Smallpiece. You cannot be expected, at your age, to enter into the feelings of a father towards his children."

"What then?"

He shook his head. "Yesterday," he resumed, "I was a man who could look the whole world in the face, in the beautiful words of Longfellow's sonorous poem. To-day I am abased before my fellow-men."

Then my patience gave out. "Nonsense!" I exclaimed.

He stiffened his back. "Nonsense!" he repeated. "What do you mean by—nonsense?"

"I beg your pardon. But it does seem to me that you are taking this affair far too seriously."

"The rupture of a happy home, Mr. Smallpiece —that strikes me—I may be mistaken—as a very serious matter. The scorn and contumely of my neighbours ——"

"You could quite easily move into another neighbourhood," I pointed out.

And then it struck me that very likely it would not be so easy for him to do that. It was more than

barely probable that he owed several quarters' back-rent.

"You don't appreciate my point of view," he said pompously. "And I must say I am surprised that a young man for whom I have consistently entertained ——"

"Will it relieve your paternal anxiety to know that Rosetta and I have decided to get married?" I broke in impatiently.

He gulped visibly, as if he imbibed the information in the form of a pill. And it must indeed have been a very bitter pill; for Rosetta's earnings played an essential part in the household exchequer.

"I am glad—yes, I am overjoyed, in spite of—of certain contingent eventualities—to hear that," he said at last. And then he seemed suddenly to remember that his dignity demanded some slight titillation. "But is it not customary first to obtain the consent of a parent before assuming the responsibilities of the matrimonial estate?" he said.

"I have no parents," I said.

"But—pardon me!—Rosetta has. I am one of them; for she has two, in all."

"Do you object to our engagement, then?"

"N-no. I cannot exactly say that I have any definite objection to offer."

"In that case," I said brusquely, "I don't see what more there is to say on the matter. Would

you mind —— I am going to shave." And I unceremoniously turned my back on him.

I heard him sigh, explosively. My spine tingled with what I should have known was an entirely groundless and gratuitous fear lest he might kick me, I had been at such very small pains to conceal the contempt I felt toward him. But he merely sighed again, cleared his throat noisily, and then withdrew with a stately tread.

Miss Candlish was a type of girl quite new to my experience. She embodied the modern spirit of frank and fearless young womanhood. There was nothing mawkish or lymphatic or anæmic about her. Her appetite would have made the fathers of this generation shudder. She did not feel that it was due to her maidenhood to effect a simpering ignorance of all the elemental facts of life and call it innocence. She did not pretend that her sex does not bifurcate, nor feel that she must giggle and blush at the mention of an eligible young man's name. She did not deem it a virtue to be weak and silly, or wrong to have a will of her own. She was robustiously feminine, and expressed in her every expression and in every tone of her voice her pride in the plain fact of her sex, its responsibilities, its privileges, its potentialities, its glorious heritage of a boundless power for good, its supreme charm of loving-kindness and

sympathy and service. She was a clever girl, with wit and brains, and an inexhaustible fund of animal spirits on which to draw in any emergency, and boundless energy, and a gracious sweet humour. It may seem strange, but I recognised in her a far higher type than that my own Rosetta belonged to. But then is it not true that actually men rarely fall in love with their ideals—even when they meet them in the flesh—despite what the trifling poets say? The best sort of love seeks some equality in its mate. There are some women that the average decent man feels unworthy to aspire to. And Ella Candlish was such a one to the average man who pens these words. To my death I shall always esteem her as altogether the most excellent woman I have ever met.

She had a way of first making you a little ashamed of yourself, and then of making you laugh at yourself, and then of leading you on to cast aside all affectation and be true to yourself. Especially had she this way with Rosetta.

"How am I to get my clothes?" Rosetta wondered.

"Go and fetch them," said Ella.

"But that will mean a 'scene'."

"Could I fetch them for you?"

"I shouldn't like you to know my people, Ella."

"Then, as I said before, you must go yourself."

"I can't. I would rather re-stock my wardrobe

throughout. Ah, but I forgot. My books. All my treasures. I must have those."

"You see, Rose,—you must go. It would be weak to funk it."

"Yes," said Rosetta, laughing ruefully. "I suppose it would. And I must be brave."

The upshot was that she did go, as Ella Candlish advised. She went on the very next day, Monday, whilst I was in the City. When I returned to Tufnell Park I found Mrs. Conover again in tears. All the rooms were in a state of disorder. In the hall were a number of large boxes and bags and parcels, labelled and corded, waiting in readiness for the carman to fetch them away.

"Rosetta has been here?" said Mr. Conover, with his usual want of tact.

"Yes."

"Oh, yes, my lady has been here, right enough," snarled Amelia.

"And she still adheres to her original intention?"

"Still adheres to her—how much? Do talk like a Christian, Alfred," said his wife. "Oh, my poor head."

"I only meant that presumably she has not changed her mind about leaving us. A false girl!"

"I dunno," whimpered Mrs. Conover. "I must say she was most loving this afternoon. Spoke most dutiful, she did."

Mrs. Conover's dull eyes lighted up. "Did you point out to her——"

"Oh, I didn't start dunning the girl for money the minute I see her, if that's what you mean. Nor I don't intend to, either."

"Really, my dear——"

"If you want your supper, it's shrivelling up into nothing in the oven at this moment, I may tell you. And that's all about it," exclaimed Mrs. Conover tartly. She began to beat on her knees with her open hands and to rock back and forth in her chair. Her husband paused on his way to the door. "I dunno," sighed the Scapegrace Mother; "after all, I sometimes think we may ha' made a big mistake with Rosetta. She's a good girl, really. When I heard her knock this day I was all ready to tell her what I thought of her. But the moment I set eyes on her and heard her speak I somehow felt I didn't think so hard of her, when all was said and done. She looked so pretty, so lady-like. I wished I'd had my other dress on. She made me feel ashamed of being so untidy and that. And then she kissed me. And she cried. Rosetta don't often cry. 'We're not going to quarrel ever any more, are we, Mother?' she said. And I said, 'No, my dear; and I'm very sorry I slapped your face. And the Lord knows what it was that made me fly out at you in the way I did, all for nothing. For it does seem to me, now,

Rosetta,' I said, 'that it was only bad temper on my part, and just begrudgin' you having a little enjoyment, when I ought to have rejoiced that so pleasant-spoken a young gentleman was ready to take notice of you—' begging your pardon, Mr. Smallpiece, for you are a gentleman. And she said, 'Mother, I'll come back if you like'."

Mr. Conover's eyes goggled. "She wanted to come back?" he cried.

"No, she didn't want to come back," replied his wife. "Of course she didn't. But she said she would, if I wished it, being that softened and kind, and her eyes all shining with love, like I've never seen them since she was a tiny thing in her red frock, no higher than my knee. It was out of the goodness of her 'art she said it—just to spare her mother's feelings. 'Perhaps we should get on better in future, Mother,' she said. And I said, 'No, my dear. I'm a sick, cantankerous old woman, and your way can't ever be mine. Go,' I said, 'and do better for yourself; you that are such a lady and so refined and bright and that.' Then we both cried."

Mr. Conover seethed and swelled with fury. "You —you let her go, after she expressed a strong desire to come back!" he exclaimed. "What the devil ——!"

"Oh, swear away—do! Go on. Yes. I did more. I insisted on her going. Didn't I know it

would be best for her to be on her own? What good are the likes of us to such as her?"

"Speak for yourself, madam! What about my feelings—mine!—her father's—?"

"You didn't come into it at all. And it's no use your scowling at me, Alfred. Nature made you quite spiteful-looking enough. And it won't make any difference. I ain't goin' to stand in the girl's light for the sake of a few shillings a week; so now you know."

"It isn't the money I am thinking about at all. What are a few shillings, compared with ——"

"They're all you ever give me to keep house on."

"Are you aware, madam ——"

"Oh, I'm quite aware, as you call it, what her going away will mean to us. You'll have to do without your bottles of sauce, and your new-laid eggs, and a little less luxury all round, that's all."

"I must say ——" blustered Mr. Conover, trembling with rage so that he could scarce articulate.

"No, you mustn't. Not if you want your supper before it's got quite shrivelled up," retorted the Scapegrace Mother tartly. "My opinion is you've had too much to say, as it is. Always."

He gasped at her like a stranded fish. "I wish I had been present," he said. "It's infamous!"

But his wife pushed roughly past him, and left him to gasp and stammer by himself.



Now this surprising manifestation of a sense of grace in the Scapegrace Mother struck me as infinitely significant and even pathetic, in its way. It vastly increased my respect for Mrs. Conover. I had not thought her capable of such deep feeling. And it was dimly borne in upon me from that hour that there may have been a time when conceivably even she, whom I had despised more than any person of my acquaintance, was a woman of considerable womanliness, perhaps a bright and beautiful girl like unto Rosetta herself, with hopes and aspirations and a right perception of the duties and responsibilities of her wifely and motherly office which had been gradually warped and mortified by the too hard conditions of her life and her evil association with the shallow and selfish and—for all his superficial tricks of a mincing gentility—brutal and base man she had married. I had never again the same feelings of utter disgust and repulsion for Mrs. Conover, after that day. It was my first lesson in that school of experience which teaches us how our first hasty harsh judgments on our fellow-creatures are almost always necessarily false. It was a lesson that taught me humility and charity.

But this change in my attitude toward the Scapegrace Mother was not sufficiently comprehensive to include the other members of her family. To say that I had never liked any of them is merely to put into

a definite form of words what must be already quite apparent to the reader, I should imagine. They were now become nothing less than abhorrent to me. I felt that even to be ordinarily civil to them was to impose a strain on my patience that it was incapable of sustaining very long. It was solely with a view to enjoying as much of Rosetta's society as possible that I had taken up my abode under that roof. Now that she was gone I made up my mind to go too. I announced my decision that same evening immediately after supper. Fortunately Mr. Conover had already borrowed various small sums from me and so could not enter any very effective caveat against the propriety of my conduct in leaving the shelter of his roof without giving any reasons for doing so. And I was inflexibly resolved to give no reasons, offer no excuses, of any sort, as I could not utter my one real reason without offence and was not inclined to perjure myself out of any consideration for the feelings of a man for whom I had only contempt.

"This will be very awkward, Smallpiece," he said, blinking violently. "Just now I am considerably embarrassed by the defection of my daughter Rosetta, as you know, and consequently ——"

"That's all right," I said easily. "You needn't worry about that."

"If you refer, Smallpiece, to the monetary obliga-



tion which I have incurred towards yourself," he said, still struggling valiantly to be dignified and impressive, "you will pardon me for saying that I cannot agree with you as to there being no need for me to worry about it, to adopt your phrase. I am, as you know, a man with a very rigid code of honour. I ——"

"Precisely," I broke in. "That is why I said that we needn't either of us worry."

"Ah—pardon me again, Smallpiece—you did not say exactly that. You said ——"

However, I cut him short, somehow; and that was, of course, the last I ever heard of his indebtedness to me.

At the end of the week I removed myself and my belongings from Tufnell Park to a room in a street off the Holloway Road. And thenceforth it was understood in the office that the relations between Mr. Conover and myself were of the same distant nature that prevailed between him and all the other clerks, not one of whom ever addressed a word to him beyond what the exigencies of business demanded.

CHAPTER IV

PROMISE AND PORTENT

"FRANKLY," said Miss Candlish, "I am horribly disappointed in you."

"Which of us?" asked Rosetta.

"Both of you. You are equally hopeless. I tell you, for instance, that you ought to be sober and sensible. And you are. I remind you that romance is all very well, but that this is a prosaic and practical world. And you agree. I quote time-honoured precepts to you, such as 'Patience is a virtue' and 'A stitch in time saves nine,' and you nod your entire approval of these gems of wisdom. Now I submit that that is no way to behave at all. Here am I, set up in business as a mentor and adviser (as I think), perfectly prepared to meet and defeat all manner of opposition, not only from you two but from all sorts of unexpected quarters; simply aching to show you how silly and hot-headed and rash you are, and to display my own high qualities of prudence and foresight and common sense. And instead of your doing all in your power to help me



make a decent show you are most dishearteningly reasonable and sane. You show no disposition to do anything in the least ridiculous or absurd. You do not fume and rave. You meekly fold your hands and acquiesce in my judgment. You even go farther than I do myself along the lines of expediency. Which is obviously quite wrong of you. It is not what I have a right to expect. I repeat that I am horribly, grievously disappointed in you both. You give me no chance at all."

"After all, though," I ventured; "you can't call it a long engagement."

"But, my dear Ferdinand, that is precisely what I do call it. Here we are, at the beginning of June. You propose to get married the first week in August, because you will both be having your annual holiday then. That gives you two months for reflection. And the worst of it is that I know you will reflect, as I should advise you ought, instead of rhapsodising and poetising, as I should just love you to do. Two months. Eight weeks. Sixty eternities! Instead of eight interminable hours. For don't you see that yours being a sort of runaway match you ought to have got married out of hand. You ought to be quite an old—a three-days' old—married couple by now. Or, at the very mildest, you ought to be talking about special licences at this minute, and I ought to be gravely and wisely

dissuading you from launching upon any such reckless course. I ought to be holding you back from the fateful plunge. I ought to be pointing out to you that marriage is the most important event of your lives. That they who marry in haste repent at leisure. Instead of which"—she threw up her hands in a gesture of mock disgust—"I feel that the opportunity of my life is slipping away from me. That's all," she said. "An opportunity that is not likely to occur again, in the words of the slightly panic-stricken advertiser."

And she frowned on us and beamed at us over the tea-cups.

"I really don't see why there shouldn't be a cake and a breakfast and orange-blossoms and bridesmaids," she went on after a pause.

"That's because you don't know my mother," said Rosetta; "not to speak of my father. Or my sister Amelia. Or the twins. Or the infant prodigy."

A look of pain darkened Miss Candlish's eyes, as always happened when Rosetta spoke slightingly of her family.

"You are shocked," said Rosetta. "That is because you don't understand. Your own mother —— Ah, the dear old lady! You don't need to have illusions about her. But my people—I would have to build the Wall of China round them to ——"



"Don't, dear. I can't bear to hear it," cried Ella. Rosetta laughed discordantly.

"I don't wonder that Ella thinks us cold-blooded," I remarked to Rosetta, an hour later, as we strolled together in Finsbury Park.

"Cold-blooded?"

"Matter-of-fact, then."

"Of course we are matter-of-fact. We have to be."

"Yes," I assented rather ruefully. "I suppose we have."

"You see," said Rosetta. "Ours is to be really a *mariage de convenance*."

"That sounds stately anyway," I observed, smiling. "Only I don't happen to be hankering after any sort of stateliness."

"There is nothing stately about it," she said. "It merely implies a contract entered into from motives of expediency."

"Yet you object to the word 'cold-blooded'?"

She shifted her ground. "I have had all the romance battered out of me," she exclaimed passionately. "If I had been differently brought up I might have been like other girls. Even as it is, I don't mind confessing to you, Ferdinand, that I feel rather sick and sore too when I think of what I may be missing in life, just now. I am so young, and yet I feel so old. When I hear other girls

talking about their love-affairs—and they all want to confide in me—I feel like an interloper, sometimes. I cannot enter into their feelings at all. Marriage has always seemed to me just a means of escape. I am aware that I may be merely exchanging one kind of cage for another. But I can be sure of one thing: that it will be a clean cage."

"It won't be a cage at all, any more than the world is a cage," I said valiantly. "It will be a long winding road that sometimes broadens out into the white dusty highway and sometimes narrows into a shady path between mossy banks running through the sheltered woodlands. There will be storm and shine, darkness and light, bitter cold and hot angry blasts. We shall often be weary and impatient, often sad and downcast; but then we shall be glad and content too, and merry and buoyant. And the end of the way? . . . Let us hope and pray, dear, that we may arrive home at last, hand in hand, with all our sorrows forgotten, and all our differences swept away in a kindly remembrance of each other."

"That sounds very beautiful," she said softly. "That is what a poet would be likely to say."

"And think. And feel," I added eagerly.

"I don't know," said she, touching the back of my hand with the back of hers, which was our way of caressing one another in public. "If you really



think and feel that, then I am afraid you are too good for me, too good for the world to which I belong. And I don't want to believe that you are so much better than I am. That would make me despair."

"Better than you!" I cried. "What foolish talk is this, my dear! I am not worthy to be in the shadow of your presence."

"Don't call it that!" she said. "Call it the sunshine of my love."

"Ah, you do love me, then?"

She turned her face toward me, and her lips trembled visibly. "I—don't—know," she answered.

It was the invariable reply that she made to my oft-repeated question.

"But don't imagine," I resumed, after a long interval of silence, "that I am a mere idle dreamer, because I try to write poetry, Rosetta. Though I don't know why a dreamer should be set apart from his fellows as an object of pity and contempt—gentle pity, good-humoured contempt. Oh, yes. Because, after all, dreams are the foundation upon which all the beauty and the strength and the goodness of things are built up. First the proud dreams, then the noble deeds. Without visions there would be very little substance of happiness in the world. We do not live so much by what we do as by what we strive to be. Our best hours are

not those in which we live, here and now, but the days that are past and the days yet to come, in which we were and are going to be so much better and finer than our mortal selves. Don't you think so, Rosetta?"

She gave me a quick glance, half-startled, half-questioning.

"I know very little about myself, I'm afraid," she said. "I have lived so much inside my own skin, as a dear old professor I know used to say, that I have lost the power of getting outside it. There hasn't been anywhere to get to. My life has been so narrow, so cramped, so confined on every hand by stultifying limitations. And unless one can get outside oneself it is impossible to take any but the shortest views of anything. . . . You know what my home, my surroundings, have been," she went on, after a thoughtful pause; "but you don't know —you can't!—what an influence all that daily unloveliness has worked upon me. It is easy to say, as I have heard you say—and as the dear old professor used to say—for you are rather alike, in some ways—it is easy to say that one should not be too much preoccupied with immediacies, with the conditions of one's lot. That it matters not what we do, or how we live, or with whom we have to associate, so long as we keep our ideals bright and our thoughts pure and holy. It does matter. It

matters horribly. It is at the root of all the trouble. Ideals and aspirations, which are the flowers of the mind, need air as much as other flowers do. And if the only air they get is foul and tainted they must wither or put forth only sickly and distorted growths."

These were not her exact words, or mine, of course, merely the gist and pith of them.

That she spoke in all sincerity was plain from the earnest moving intensity of her tones, the uplifted look on her face, and the light that shone in her eyes.

It was a fair calm evening, holding promise of a fair calm morrow. The clear beauty of the atmosphere seemed to shed a benign radiance over all Nature, even as Nature revealed herself, trimmed and clipped and garnished, within the circumscribed bounds of that neat green London park; an atmosphere that seemed to palpitate with a spirit of peace and to breathe a fragrant message of blessing in our ears. The distant hum and roar of the streets, and the smoke of its myriad sacrificial fires that rose from a thousand hearths, dimming the horizon; even these evidences of the commonplace world without lent a charm of mystery to our mood as to our environment. Just as the low sonorous diapason of vulgar trafficking softened and mellowed all more intimate sounds, so that sombre slowly-ascending

cloud from a thousand blackened chimneys was transmuted by the rays of the sinking sun into a realm of faëry, hanging midway between earth and heaven.

"There is some one I know," exclaimed Rosetta.

Her voice was hoarse, tense, vibrant with some emotion blending dismay and alarm and gladness.

We had sat down on a seat against a mighty tree-trunk whose sweeping branches overshadowed us. At her words I looked up and saw the figure of a man approaching us slowly. It was a tall burly figure, clad in a suit of light tweeds and crowned with a Panama hat, under whose turned-down brim glowed the red point of a cigar. The westering light irradiated our faces and I perceived that this man had espied and recognised Rosetta. He faltered in his stride, hesitated for a moment doubtfully, and then came walking directly toward us. As he drew nearer I saw that he was not a very young man. His age would be about forty. He had a pale, hawk-like face and a huge fair moustache. As if not knowing what she did Rosetta started to her feet and stood in an attitude of expectancy, as if awaiting his pleasure. I also rose, but more deliberately.

"Hullo, Rosie!" he said, with hateful familiarity, as he plucked off his soft hat by the crown and held



out his hand. "Who'd ha' thought of seeing you here?"

He had a fluty, high-pitched voice and spoke with that vile accent, flat and thick and toneless, which is affected only by the would-be-refined, underbred denizens of the suburbs. As he shook hands with Rosetta I eyed him pretty critically, and my verdict on his appearance and demeanour was not favourable. He had a hard, harsh assurance of manner, like the surface of silk, which sat uneasily and awkwardly upon him, yet did not seem to hint at the secret presence in his composition of any redeeming graces of shyness or diffidence. As he rolled his cigar into the corner of his mouth with a dexterous flick of the tongue, in order to enunciate more clearly, I observed that his heavy soft moustache was stained and sodden at the ends from his unclean habit of chewing it between his big square teeth. And I observed, too, that his lips were very thick and red and wet and shining.

"Introduce me, Rosie," he said, with a quick sidelong glance in my direction.

Rosetta introduced us. His name was Horace Wrathall.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Matthews," said he.

Rosetta corrected him incisively: "Mis-ter Smallpiece".

"I knew it wasn't 'Matthews,' really," he said, with

a grin. "Wanted to get it quite right, that's all. Because you never do get a person's name right, first go off, as a rule, and it's a nuisance, sometimes. And how are all your people, Rosie? How's the old man? Still modelling himself on Dr. Johnson, what?"

Rosetta laughed and said: "He's just the same".

"Remarkable man, sir!" commented Mr. Wrathall, addressing me.

"Dr. Johnson?" I queried.

"Not much! Old Conover, of course. And the Mater, Rosie? Has she overtaken the clock yet?"

Rosetta laughed again, to my infinite exasperation.

"You'll excuse us, Mr. Smallchump—I beg your pardon: Smallpiece, of course. You see, Rosie and I are rare old friends. Aren't we, Rosie?"

"Mr. Wrathall used to lodge with us," Rosetta explained to me.

"Perhaps I had better walk on, if you ——" I suggested, and left the sentence unfinished as the gorge rose hotly in my throat.

"How absurd!" she cried. "Of course not." She turned to him again. "I've left home, Horace," she informed him.

"Never! Bai Jove! Brahvo, you!" A sudden disquieting doubt assailed him. "Don't mean to say you—er—married, eh? What? Oh, I see!



Shortly, eh? Ah! Allow me to congratulate you, Mr. Smallpiece," he said with portentous solemnity.

"Thank you," I said coldly.

"You're a deuced lucky man!" he went on. "There was a time—I half-hoped I might be the lucky man myself. But no grudge, you know. Rosie, here, wouldn't have anything to say to me of that sort. Would you, Rosie?"

His insistence on her Christian name, and the constant reiteration of his direct appeals to her, senseless as they were, began to irritate me beyond repression. I felt that I had grown pale from fury; I realised that I was trembling violently.

"Don't talk nonsense," said Rosetta, but not at all resentfully. Indeed there was more than a suggestion of a simper in her manner, and she seemed to be rather pleased than otherwise by his gross insinuation.

"Well, I suppose I'd better be toddling on," said Mr. Wrathall. "You two turtle-doves don't want me. But you might tell me, first, where you're hanging out, Rosie?"

She told him.

"I'll look you up," he promised her. "Any special time for being in?"

"Between five and seven is the best time, if you want a cup of tea. Miss Candlish makes it, so you needn't be afraid."

"Oh, I'd drink worse things than your tea — I would even eat one of your cakes—for the sake of your company," he said.

And then, with another flourish of the hat, he swung on his heel and left us.

Side by side we stood watching his receding figure as it faded into the gathering darkness. And the darkness seemed to have gathered during those last few minutes with an incredible swiftness. All the brightness and genial heat had gone out of the world, leaving it gloomy and dour and chill. The flaming gold of the western sky had turned to cold grey ashes. The rising wind blew gustily in the upper branches of the trees with the sound of a peevish woman's swishing draperies. From the lower branches there hung suspended long thin ragged streamers of mist fluttering in the quickening breeze like the gauzy cerements of suicidal ghosts.

At last the dusk swallowed up his figure in the purple shadows and we looked at one another challengingly, and turned and walked slowly on, away from the spot where this most disturbing rencounter had taken place. A smouldering sense of injury dried up the fount of speech in me And I was acutely aware that Rosetta guessed at this feeling of mine, and resented it.

"Well?" she said, breaking the silence. "What do you think of my old friend?"



"Oh, he's quate nace," said I, mimicking his accent. And I could have bitten out my tongue an instant later for betraying me into venting my spleen in that foolish, crude fashion. I knew that it had been better for me to feign an indifference to Rosetta's "rare old friend"; but I was possessed of a devil of perversity and must give way to it.

"Don't you like him?" asked Rosetta, affecting extreme surprise.

"I neither like nor dislike the fellow," said I. "One doesn't use terms of that sort in speaking of a dirty little boy who chalks rude things on one's doorstep."

She raised indignant eyes to mine. "I'm sure he was very polite to you," she said.

"Oh, Good God—yes! He was polite enough!" I exclaimed. "So is the average barber."

She drew sharply away from me. "Fellow! dirty little boy! barber!" she burst forth. "If that is the way you are going to speak of my friends ——"

"I beg your pardon," I interposed. "But—I can't help it—I don't like that kind of person, Rosetta."

"That kind of person, as you call him," she retorted, and her tone was painfully reminiscent of her scapegrace mother, "is a very enterprising and wealthy City financier."

"As bad as that!" I murmured sardonically. "Dear, dear!"

"I don't know what you mean, Ferdinand," she said, with a haughty toss of the head. "He's every bit as much a gentleman as you are."

"I have no use for the word gentleman," I said pompously. "It affronts me."

"Well, I'm sure!" She sniffed, delicately, as an angel might. "You are very superior this evening."

"It's a sense of contrast that makes me so, then," I rejoined.

"Anybody would think he had insulted you. He's a clever man, too."

"He must be to have made you think so."

She flounced ahead with a shake of her skirts. I followed laggingly, a pace or two behind her. For perhaps a hundred yards or more we proceeded in this ridiculous wise. Then I caught her up, and captured her hand.

"Come, Rosetta," I said. "I have begged your pardon." This was hardly ingenuous. "I am sorry. Let's talk of something—somebody else."

"You've spoilt my evening," she protested, on a sob.

"I'm sorry," I repeated dully. "It was a beautiful evening too—before he appeared," I could not help adding unwisely.



She snatched her hand away. "No!" she said. "I won't have Horace run down!"

"Horace!" I echoed her, all my resentment aflame once more. "There it is again. You call him 'Horace' and he calls you 'Rosay'."

"And why shouldn't he? Don't you understand that he lodged with us, was practically a member of the family, for more than a year."

"Was this before or after he became a wealthy City financier?" I inquired maliciously.

"He had been unfortunate. Some of his schemes had gone wrong, failed. And he had to retrench for a time. But he's regained his old position now. He is the sort of man that doesn't sit down meekly under a reverse, Horace is. A strong reserved man!"

I could not help it. I laughed aloud, derisively. "That silly vulgar oaf!"

"Perhaps you'll be surprised to hear," said she, "that that silly vulgar oaf, as you call him—and he is nothing of the sort, he has a resolute determined character—that he employs a dozen clerks or more." And she smiled at me triumphantly as if that clinched the matter.

"Oh," said I, "there are more than that in the Bankruptcy Court. I can easily believe he keeps them all busy."

"Are you being sarcastic or something?" she inquired loftily.

"Not on purpose," said I. "I prefer to leave that sort of thing to experts."

But I have already set down more than enough of our stupid wrangle. It prolonged itself for an hour; and during that time we bickered and snarled at one another like two ill-conditioned dogs tied up on either side of an open paling. I never recall the events of that night without a sense of degradation. I grow hot and damp under my clothes whenever I remember the bitter stinging things that I said and the delight I had in my own rancorous self-torture. For I hurt myself far more than I hurt Rosetta at each fresh gibe I uttered. It was with quivering angry faces that we confronted one another at last at the door of the mansions in which she lodged.

"Good-night," she said abruptly, and turned and would have darted into the dark hall without another word of farewell, but I clutched her by the arm and held her.

"You're not going to leave me like that, Rosetta?" I cried.

"I never want to see you again. I mean it. I never knew you were like this. I am glad I have found you out in time," she panted. "Let me go!"

Then I sloughed all my dignity—which is only a sort of folly's domino, after all—and humbled myself, prostrated myself at her feet.

"Oh, forgive me!" I implored her. "I never knew I could be like this either. I don't know what can have come over me. I must be mad, I think."

"I think so, too," she answered with a hard face.

"Won't you forgive me?"

"I can't—just yet. I feel that I hate you at this minute. You had better let me go before I say anything worse than that."

"Rosetta!"

But the poignant appeal of my voice did not seem to move her in the least.

"I can't stand a womanish man!" she said cruelly. "Whatever Horace Wrathall may be, he isn't that."

This wanton re-introduction of his name stung me to re-kindled fury. "Damn him!" I spluttered. "To Hell with him!"

Instantly she planted another stab. "And he would not swear before a lady either!" she exclaimed scornfully.

"For an obvious reason: he can never have been on sufficiently familiar terms with one."

"He has been on sufficiently familiar terms, as you call it, with me."

"That is enough," said I. "Good-night. And good-bye."

The words were hardly out before I had left her side, and long before I had appreciated their full meaning I had turned the corner of the street.

Then an awful consciousness of their bodeful significance fell upon me like a douche of icy water; and I stopped dead in my headlong course. In a moment I was racing back. But she was gone, and the tall black front of the great brick building gloomed and lowered darkly upon me, with its projecting eaves frowning above the yellow patches of lighted window like frowning beetling brows above evil eyes.

Now I am one of those unfortunate wretches who have learned to appreciate to the full—from frequent horrific experience of having the blessing denied me—God's great gift of sleep. To suffer under the agony and bloody sweat of a white night—so-called, it has sometimes seemed to me, because then the playground of the imagination is converted into a lonely churchyard crowded with monuments of the dead and haunted by a drifting ghastly host of mournful spirits: that has been one of the curses laid upon me from birth for my sins, and should be their ample expiation. My soul is so scarred and seared with memories of such nights that the terrors of Hell have no power to affright me with any menace of a worse doom. There is no mundane conception of any pain or anguish which can transcend the reality of that long-drawn-out conflict between weary body and weary brain. To lie and listen to the muttering accusing tongues of conscience; to turn and toss as

on a red-hot grid with the mocking voices of a legion of devils ringing in your ears; to pass in review, again and again, all the sickening details of your follies and mistakes and crimes; to long hopelessly and helplessly to undo those deeds which you have done and ought not to have done, and to retrieve the omissions from your blotted and defiled record of those things you have left undone; to recant all your proud vows and protestations, and confess all your mean base perjuries; to be at once the prisoner, the prosecutor, and the judge; to see yourself as others see you and then to see yourself with the eyes of your Creator; to fret and squirm in a cauldron of scalding tears that you have caused to flow; and to labour amid the broken ruins of the happiness you have wrecked in a vain endeavour to restore it; to seek to stay with the prop of your self-respect those castles in the air which you have vainly tried to build on the windy heights; to live a hundred wasted lives in a few brief hours, and to die a hundred shameful deaths: this it is to pass through the burning fiery furnace of a night of sleeplessness and wild unrest.

And such an ordeal was my appointed punishment for the sacrilege I had been guilty of in my bitter senseless quarrel with my beloved one.

Dimly I recall how I raged through the simmering streets in a frenzy of passionate self-reproach, that

white night of June, moonlit and calm, languorous with scented odours, and flushed with the rosy pride of summer. I recall how the twinkling lights and the careless crowds, the merry stir and hubbub of the thronging thoroughfares, struck upon my disordered consciousness with a quality of dreamful insignificance and confusion, like the phantasmal sights and sounds of a febrile vision. I seemed to be the only living being in a world of toys. The people were as so many automata; the murmur of their voices and all the clatter and noise and bustle of their human intercourse, as the echoes of a far-off sea imprisoned in an empty polished shell. I seemed to stride on seven-league boots through a multitude of tiny pigmies. My head was caught up among the stars. I was brother to the sun and moon. And all this infinitesimal life that fussed and babbled about my feet seemed no more than the frantic hurrying and scurrying of a disrupted colony of ants. I felt myself to be awfully and desolatingly alone that night. My own destiny was so large and so remote from the common affairs of every day that I marvelled when a child cried weakly, or men quarrelled, or women laughed. They seemed to have so little cause, beside the tragic magnificence of my preoccupations.

It was because I knew what awaited me on my return to my lodgings that I prolonged my aimless



wanderings into the small hours. And when I reached my room at last I was dropping with fatigue.

I sank down upon the edge of my bed. My body was drenched with pringling sweat; my knees trembled under me; and my mouth was dry and sore as if I had been recovering from a fever. Presently I collapsed and toppled over and lay sideways with my hot wet head reposing on the cold surface of the pillow, my arms flung wide, my legs dangling down limply, so that my toes just touched the strip of carpet. There I lay supine, and for a blessed interval I was so spent and overcome that I lost all sense of time and place, even of being and feeling. It seemed to me, in my bone-weariness, that I must be fast slipping away out of existence in that moment of utter exhaustion. It seemed not possible that I could any longer hold on to my life with such poor remnants of power and will as remained to me.

But soon, as I became more restored and my nerves began to resume their suspended activity, my misery started up, refreshed and re-armed, to crowd upon me again and to agonise me, body and mind and spirit.

From force of habit I had lit my candle; but I had not troubled to draw the blinds; and so the interior of my room was reflected in the glowing dark panes, in mellow lights and shadows of gold and

umber and purple, like some ancient painting of a Dutch interior. I could see my own prostrate figure darkly outlined above the white level of the counterpane; and when, on an idle prompting, I raised one arm slowly and flourished my hand in the air, my dim other self seemed to hail me from the deep outer darkness. Then I felt that I must be almost at the end of my sanity to behave so. And I remember that I lay listening eagerly for the first twittering warnings of approaching madness. And I did hear them. They came at first in a sibilant hiss of whispering voices, sounding at once clear and distinct yet inarticulate, like the musical purl of dropping water or the tiny crisp grinding noise that frost makes in its slow building-up of flower-like traceries of ice upon glass. Then I heard voices that laughed, low and softly, mockingly. And then a hoarse, bass roaring, as of far-off thunder, rumbled and reverberated in my ears.

I sat up, stood up, in two quick abrupt movements and began to take off my damp, clinging clothes. Arrayed in my nightwear, with a cool current playing on my heated, stiff flesh, I took out an extra candle from my private store in the cupboard and laid it beside my candle-stick on a chair against my bedside, and then at haphazard took a book from the shelves and stretched my aching limbs in readiness for my long sleepless vigil.



The book fell open in my hand at a well-thumbed page as I composed myself; and I read:—

"I have noted the greatest part of ancient opinions to agree in this: that when our life affords more evil than good, it is then time to die: and to preserve our life to our torment and incommoditie, is to spurre and shocke the very rules of nature."

Again and again I conned the familiar words: at first with only a sensuous delight in their lilting lulling music, then with an ever-quickening sense of their import.

"To preserve our life to our torment . . . is to . . . shocke the very rules of nature!"

O most large-minded and aloof moralist! How easy for you to set down in considered phrase, and with such an appearance of austere seemliness masking the suicidal thought, a conclusion at which all moderns have learnt to shudder and shrink as if it opened inevitably and irreparably the very gate of eternal perdition! But was I not in Hell already?

I read on. "But to drive off the contempt of death to such a degree as to imploy it to distract and remove himselfe from honours, riches, greatnesse, and other goods and favours, which wee call the goods of fortune: as if reason had not enough to doe to persuade us to forgoe and leave them, without adding this new surcharge unto it, I had neither seene the same commanded nor practised. . . . There is no

man so base-minded that loveth not rather to fall once than ever to remaine in feare of falling."

I laid the book aside and reflected heavily, dully on the meaning of that implied counsel.

"There is no man so base-minded that loveth not rather to fall once than ever to remain in fear of falling!"

And I had fallen low, in all conscience. The depths, not the heights, of Jealousy measured the distance of my fall, or it had been greater. I had not fallen from the sunlit, angry peaks of tragedy, but from the lower slopes of the Valley of Humiliation into the ditch of farce. I had selected for my stalking-horse not a mettled, richly-caparisoned charger but a stalled ass. And I had tried to bray him down! . . .

In a self-tormenting mood I have just taken down the old volume and read the chapter through: *To avoid Voluptuousness in regard of Life.* And the result is not in the least what I had anticipated. I am only moved to laughter and all the splendour of my imagined heroics is dissipated on the four winds of my mirth at the recollection of that night of heart-burning folly in which I lay fondly striving to read the reflections of the old philosopher into my own sorry plight, and to weave the polished suave woof of his calm grey thoughts into the tawdry warp



of my own poor mean passion. I visualise the figure I cut between the sheets in my narrow bed, with the tall candle guttering in the draught, and my strained vision and bemused intelligence and lacerated sensibilities engaged upon the consolations of literature in the hour of my first green-sickness; and I blush for myself that was.

The mere spectacle defeats, abashes me. I can write no more in the flamboyant vein.

But the dawn had come up, rain-riddled and wan, out of the scowling eastern sky long before my tired senses found surcease of their pain in tearful dreams.

CHAPTER V

SIDE-LIGHTS

I WENT to the office that morning in a heavy downpour. The whole City was blurred to a uniform drab hue under a pale grey sky. The rain brought no relief of coolness to the air. It seemed rather to aggravate the heat and to convert the sodden ways into so many vapour-baths. I was heavy and stupid from sleeplessness. My head buzzed as if it had been a cageful of wasps, and every one of them stinging me. My nerves were all unstrung, and my body was coldly damp with an unclean moisture. The common sights and sounds of the streets were all an offence to my senses. The atmosphere smelt rancid and sour. The clatter of the traffic seemed to beat upon my brain with the stunning impact of heavy hammers. Everybody appeared to be travelling in an opposite direction to myself, and to take a malignant pleasure in obstructing my path and indulging in a dance of rage with me. It was one of these mornings when one loathes one's fellow-creatures

and the world seems most evilly over-populated with obnoxious people.

Mr. Conover seized an early opportunity to ask me the questions that he did occasionally remember to put to me: "How is Rosetta?"

"All right, I believe," said I.

He eyed me narrowly, searchingly. "Does that reply indicate that you have not seen her lately, Mr. Smallpiece?" he inquired.

"Why should it?" I growled.

"Pardon me. You spoke as if you were not in a position to be positive. 'All right, I believe,' were the words you employed."

"Well, I do believe she is all right," I said.

He blinked rapidly. "When did you see her last?" he asked me.

"Twelve hours ago."

"Oh." He began to scrape his grizzled jaws with his lank fingers. "I was afraid, from your manner, that you might have had—ah—a lovers' tiff," he remarked.

Then I fell to an ignoble temptation.

"I was introduced to an old lodger of yours last night," I said, with ill-simulated carelessness.

"Ah!"

"A Mr. Wrathall."

"Yes. Oh, yes. A very superior person indeed. Ye-es. I am sure you must have enjoyed his society,

Mr. Smallpiece. Such a man of the world! Such a brilliant conversationalist!"

"Who is he, exactly?"

"Eh? Mr. Wrathall? Oh, a City gentleman. A financier. Very rich, I believe." He suddenly stopped and tapped me on the breast. His face was contorted into a lecherous grin. "Rosetta and he—once upon a time—a word to the wise ——I need say no more to a young man of your remarkable acumen, I am sure."

I had a feeling of deadly nausea. "Excuse me," I stammered. "But I would rather you said a great deal more, having said so much. What precisely was the nature of the relations between him and Rosetta?"

I blushed for myself as I uttered the halting words, but I could never sink to any arts of fence with Mr. Conover.

"Well, Mr. Smallpiece," he said slowly; "that would be a hard matter for me to define. At one time I thought that he was—ah—a suitor for Rosetta's hand. I fancied I discovered a growing rapprochement there. I thought he was—ah—smitten with Rosetta, to use a vulgarism. We all did. My wife did. Rosetta did, herself. And, of course, it would have been a considerable worldly advancement for her. Too great an advancement, I suppose. For nothing came of it eventually. A disappointment. But naturally we brought no pres-

sure to bear upon Mr. Wrathall's inclinations. After all, we have our proper pride. We recognised that his position was rather a different one from ours. That he moved in a glittering sphere we could never hope to enter. We should have been honoured, of course. We might have used our best endeavours to adapt ourselves to his more exalted circle. Failing that, we would have been content to efface ourselves, and gaze in humble reverence from afar. But when his fortunes took a turn for the better, a propitious turn, we bowed to the inevitable. We are not a mercenary family, Mr. Smallpiece, as you know. And if we are ambitious at all, it is merely to do our duty and preserve intact our proper self-respect in that station of life unto which it has pleased God to call us."

I listened to the fluent unctuous rascal in silence, whilst my flesh crept.

"Mr. Conover, you make me feel sick," I said when he had done.

He started. A dull flush overspread his face and bloated his features.

"I—I beg your pardon?" he gasped out doubtfully, as if he could not trust his ears.

"I say that you make me feel sick, Mr. Conover," I repeated, raising my voice.

He glanced over his shoulder round the office apprehensively. And as my own gaze followed his

I encountered the grinning regard of our overgrown junior, Crichton.

"I don't know if your intention is to be grossly offensive to me, Mr. Smallpiece," whined Mr. Conover. "I certainly fail to understand what I have done to induce you to go out of your way to insult me."

"I don't go out of my way," I returned brutally. "I don't need to. You do all that."

He looked at me with a bilious baleful light of animosity in his rheumy eyes, and I saw the dull flush fade slowly from his countenance, leaving it a pallid leaden colour. Without another word he left me, and went to his own place. But throughout the long day, whenever I raised my eyes from my desk I saw that he watched me stealthily.

I asked myself: Why indeed had I gone out of my way to insult him? And as I propound the question anew I am aware that many who read this chronicle may already have put that same inquiry to themselves, with possibly some amazement. And I can only say that I do not know why I did it. And here again I am brought face to face with one of the prime difficulties which beset me in the writing of this true record, which is nothing if not wholly true. For the truth has a way of being improbable sometimes. On the stage and in a novel people act more or less reasonably. Motives for their actions are

clearly shown and if necessary analysed and dissected. Effect follows cause surely and directly as day follows night and night day. There is a neat dove-tailing of the incentive with the performance. It is only in real life, I suppose, that people act illogically and with an insane purposelessness. At any rate—and any risk—I can only set down here the events as they happened, and leave the mystery of their causation and occurrence to psychologists of a more profound understanding than I possess to divine accurately and to account for.

It was a dreary weary day. Not once did the sun break through the clouds, though the rain ceased about noon. We chanced to be very busy. The office grew hourly more close and stuffy; but though we opened wide the windows, that seemed merely to admit so much more added noise and heat and stench. Toward the end of the afternoon Crichton and I had to go out together to examine an abstract. We paused on our way to partake of a cup of tea, in one of the new cheap shops that were just then bring established all over the City.

"I say," said Crichton; "I heard you and old Conover talking about that Mr. Wrathall."

I was taken aback. "You know him too?" I exclaimed.

"Only by name," said Crichton. "Old Conover used to shove him down our necks for all he was

worth and a bit more a couple of years ago or so. He tried to get the firm to take up this fellow Wrathall's business, but old Keogh wouldn't look at it. Something in the fraudulent company-promoting line, isn't he?"

"I don't know," said I.

"Want to know?" he demanded.

"Not particularly," I replied.

"Thought you were sweet on Conover's daughter: that's all."

"Good God!" I cried. "Who told you so?"

"He did, of course. Old Conover."

I had no words to express my sensations.

"Isn't it true, then?" asked Crichton. "I thought it couldn't be. I thought you had too much sense to allow yourself to get mixed up with such a lousy crew."

"Do you know Miss Conover?" I inquired, with a sick foreboding.

"Don't know any of 'em," he said. "But judging from their sweet papa ——" He laughed.

I rose from the table. "Let's get on," I said huskily.

"What's the hurry?"

"It's so beastly hot in here."

"So it is outside," said Crichton. "But all right. I take you, old boy. I don't want to pry. But if you're in it—well, I'm sorry for you. And if

you're not—well, you're jolly well out of it: that's all."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Why!" cried Crichton. "He's been gassing about your going out with his daughter. He's done his best to make us hate you as much as we used to hate the very name of Wrathall. But speaking for myself, I was only sorry for you. Though I didn't half believe you could be such a mug. Why, that girl, from all accounts, has been slung at the head of every lodger he's had. Moment we heard he had hooked you we began to make bets about it. I backed you myself. Backed you not to be taken in, I mean, of course."

"Thank you," I said bitterly. "If you will kindly tell me how much you have lost I will pay your bet."

"Mean to say—?" he cried, and checked himself. "Oh, lor'! I did think you had got more gumption in you!" he muttered disconsolately. "Oh, that's all gay. You don't owe me anything. I only backed you with my good opinion, and the loss of that won't break either me or you."

How can I express my feelings of humiliation at finding that my love affair had, thanks to Mr. Conover, become a topic of vulgar speculation in the office? How can I convey any idea of the tumult of emotions that possessed me as I reflected on what

I had heard and deduced, first from Rosetta herself and then from her father and now from this grinning lout of a clerk? All manner of unworthy suspicions began to fret my mind. Could it be possible that I was merely the last in a long succession of lovers who had been entrapped by Rosetta's charms and who had, one by one, escaped from their domination? I remembered how her voice had betrayed at once dismay and alarm and gladness at the sight of Wrathall in the park. And then I recalled how her horrible father had used her as a bait on that first occasion when I was taken to her home. My body seemed to burn and smart as I reflected on this new aspect of Rosetta that had been revealed to me in the light of these belated discoveries. Could it be true, as was hinted, that she had been passed from hand to hand in this disgusting fashion by her father, and had meekly submitted to be turned to such degrading uses? Was it conceivable that I had consummated the experiments of years by my ready subjection? I writhed at the devastating thought.

And then I made a sudden resolution. I would see her no more. I would cut her out of my heart. After all, she had no claim on my fealty. She had never once confessed that she loved me. But then I remembered how happy we had been together. How she had openly professed admiration and esteem for me. How gentle and towardly had been

her behaviour, and yet how dignified. How we had conversed and confided one to another, and aspired and dreamed together in a close innocent communion. My resolution was melted in the glow of that recollection. She could not be the coarse, false creature that these foul rumours and misleading evidences made her out to be. At least I would see her once more, for my own satisfaction. I would try to come to some clear understanding with her before I decided finally to snap the dear bond that bound us together as with a chain of roses.

It was in the fulfilment of this determination that I knocked at the door of the flat about eight o'clock that same evening.

Miss Candlish admitted me. I thought she subjected me to a rather severe scrutiny as we shook hands.

"Rosetta in?" I asked.

"No," was the unexpected reply. "I don't think she expected you to-night. She has gone to see her people."

I stood stupidly twirling my hat round and round.

"Come in and wait," said Ella. "I daresay she will be back soon. She was going to call at Tufnell Park on her way home from school."

I followed her into the sitting-room and we sat down,

"Now, Ferdinand," said Ella, "I am going to scold you."

I forced a thin laugh. "That will be an experience," said I.

"You have been quarrelling with my Rosetta."

"Well," I said, "it takes two to make a quarrel, you know."

"No, no," said Ella, "It only takes one—when the other one happens to be the dearest girl in the world, as Rosetta is."

"Ella," I burst forth, "I am very unhappy!" And the hot weak tears stung my eyes.

"Then I am comforted," said she with a whimsical smile, underlying which however was a tender light of solicitude that lifted her words above the reproach of heartlessness. "For unhappiness, as well as happiness, is one of the signs of true love."

"Let me tell you all about it," I pleaded.

"That is what I should strongly advise you to do," said she.

And so I told her—everything, all my hopes and fears, my doubts and miserable jealousies and heart-burnings and dire imaginings: pouring out my tale of woe in a turgid flood of words, incoherently, violently, passionately. She listened with a sweet grave sympathy.

"Now let me tell you what I know and what I think," she said, when I had made an end. "It is



all this groping, all this stumbling in the dark, that hurts people so.

"But first let me explain that I love Rosetta. Does that seem beside the point, to a man? I don't think it is. For love makes us very wise, sometimes. And because I love her, I know her, I believe, better than anybody else does, better than she knows herself. You have seen me blench when she has spoken disparagingly, contemptuously even, of her people. She says that I am shocked because I don't know them. And very likely she is right. I have not met them. She won't let me have anything to do with them. She is ashamed of them, in fact. And more ashamed of being ashamed. Which makes her hard and defiant about them. Which shows, though, that she has enough affection for them to be susceptible of hurt at their hands. Hence I am assured that they must be—how shall I put it?—not quite nice people, and yet at the same time that they are not without some very lovable and endearing qualities."

"You flatter them!" I interjected. "They are a loathsome crowd!"

"I am sure you are too hard on them. Though I believe they must be rather unpleasant to have injected Rosetta with such deep abhorrence. But don't you see how their being so ennobles her all the more wonderfully. For she is fine. And if she

is fine in spite of her upbringing, in spite of her early associations, in spite of her home-surroundings, in spite of all the meanness and duplicity in which she has been steeped from her cradle, how much finer she is than many other women who might be accounted her equals. You have expressed some very ugly doubts about her, Ferdinand. I won't say they are unworthy doubts. We must needs be jealous for the honour of those we love. And I am no believer in the super-excellence of a blind, uncritical devotion. Haven't I said that our love should make us wise? Very well, then. You wonder if you have deceived yourself about Rosetta. You wonder if what you have heard and guessed at can mean that she is a soiled spoilt girl who has allowed herself to be used and exploited by her bad father, to his own sorry aggrandisement. Now I will tell you what I think about it. I think that Rosetta has found her life so hard to bear that she has been perhaps too eager to snatch at any means of escape. And the first means of escape that presents itself to a woman's imagination is marriage. Thus she has unconsciously and quite unwittingly played into her father's hands. She has been a ready tool, an easy catspaw. And I'm afraid her father has not been too scrupulous in his use of her to his own ends. I don't know him, as I say. And I don't want to do him any injustice. But I am rather a shrewd little

thing, really. And I have come to what appear to me to be some pretty shrewd conclusions concerning other cunning people like myself. They are usually stupid and ignorant and base. But they have as a rule a certain keenness of perception, a certain knack of seizing on the less admirable weaknesses of those they come in contact with, which makes them expert in the handling of human material. And the finer the material the less trouble they have in manipulating it, because a noble nature cannot sink to their depths of duplicity. Rosetta is proud and self-contained and perhaps a little too self-sufficient. She has had cause to be. She is too scornful of her own people to imagine that they could ever bend her to their designs. And they have been acute enough to take advantage of this. So that when you hear she has thrown herself at the head of this other man, Mr. Wrathall, and for all you know at various other men, you must not believe that at all. She has been thrown at their heads. She has been propelled from behind against her will, and has finally succumbed, partly to the force of mere sex-attraction and partly to the dazzling contrast that any averagely decent man must present to her beside the figure of her own father. That sounds harsh I know; but I afraid I must stick to it."

"And you are right!" I cried, on a sudden illuminating flash of recollection. "I remember how she

behaved that first evening I was introduced to her."

Ella peered at me through narrowed eyes. "Then perhaps I need say no more," she said. "If I have persuaded you that is sufficient."

But she did say a great deal more, very delicately, very tactfully, very skilfully, with such a radiant intuitive insight, in fact, that I never realised the extent of her powers until long afterward; and even as I write I am smitten with doubts if I have even yet fully gauged them. The result was that she rolled away the stone from what had seemed the grave of my illusions and showed me a fairyland of promise, all hung with jewels of hope and filled with a golden store of potential happiness.

For more than an hour we talked together earnestly in that little room in which the shadows deepened slowly until the only light that entered was a mingling of the reflected illumination in the street below and a still blue radiance from above. At last Rosetta returned.

Quite suddenly she entered the room and was standing before us. We had not heard the turning of her key in the outer door. The effect of her abrupt appearance in that dim interior was almost magical in its disconcerting unexpectedness. Ella checked herself in the midst of a merry peal of laughter and at once started up and began to hunt for

matches. Rosetta dropped into a chair opposite me.

"I thought you might not come to-night, Ferdinand," she said, "or I would have come straight here from school. I wish I had."

And as she proceeded to draw off her gloves, I observed that her hands were trembling.

"How did you find your people?" I inquired perfunctorily.

She shrugged her shoulders and smiled faintly but said nothing.

"I have come to ask you to forgive me," I murmured, under cover of the clatter Ella was making on the farther side of the room.

"I'm so glad," she whispered, laying her fluttering hand on mine; "because that saves me from having to do the like to you."

I lifted her hand to my lips.

CHAPTER VI

HALCYON DAYS AND SUMMER NIGHTS

IT was the night before our wedding-day, and we were at the exhibition again. It was our favourite resort that summer. Almost every Saturday we went there. Not to look at the stalls or the contents of the great glass-cases or the machinery, or to visit any of the rather tiresome and silly side-shows; but to sit in the gardens and listen to the band, or to stroll along the narrow smooth gravel paths between the trim lawns and gay flower-beds and to mingle with the careless desultory crowd.

We sat, as we had sat on that night in May when we took that first step which counted for so much, at one of the little round tables, sipping long iced drinks.

The air was still and warm. There was no least huffle of wind to temper the heavy heat. It was hard to make out the firmament above the nacreous glare of the electric light; but there seemed to be no moon or stars, and the nocturnal blue of the sky

was so charged with gloom as to be a slumbrous glowing purple.

The two months that had seemed so long in prospective had slipped away very rapidly after all, as times of probation, much dreaded in advance, are wont to do. And as I sat with Rosetta that night I felt a pang of regret for their brief passing which was better founded than I knew. For in the upshot they were proved to have been the happiest period of my life.

The question that I had used to put to her so insistently: "Do you love me?" still remained unanswered; but I asked it no more. I was content. The memory of our first and only disagreement had sufficed to restrain me from making any further explorations into the undiscovered country of the feminine heart. It was enough that she was fond and towardly, sweet and gracious, that I had a never-failing joy in our mere propinquity, and that she adapted all her moods and wishes to my inclinations, tactfully and delicately, as only a generous and loving and wise woman can.

We were together in all our spare time. Every evening we spent in one another's society; when the weather was fine, in walking about the parks or wandering over Hampstead; when it was foul, at the little flat, practising duets together or just talking or listening whilst Ella Candlish played and sang.

I do not know if it was the glamour of our own happiness that transfigured Ella in those days of our courtship and lent to her personality a radiant beauty that never gilded any other human creature. But to us—to me, as I can vouch sincerely—she seemed an embodiment of all the graces and all the virtues. And I am aware that to the unsophisticated reader, used to the sentimental transports of the conventional lover, it must seem strange that I should exalt this mere girl-friend even above my chosen sweetheart as I do. But, as I have said, this is a true chronicle, and I can only set down what really passed, in action and in my own mind. The truth is, then, that whilst I was always keenly conscious of Rosetta's deficiencies and imperfections I thought Ella nothing less than angelic—or rather, since angels are apt to strike us as cold and colourless figments of a rhapsodical fancy touched with religiosity, as a being transcending the limitations of average mundaneity. In all that she did, in all that she said, there was expressed a noble simplicity of soul and a largeness of mind that lifted her above the common ruck of mortals. She was not beautiful as Rosetta was; but she had a charm that surpassed any physical loveliness. And she was, at least, superbly dowered with many rare gifts. There was no element of strain in her display of her natural aptitudes. She did not play or sing or talk to win

applause or command our admiration. The outpourings of her talents she indulged in, as one felt instinctively, for the sheer satisfaction that she had in their exercise, and not the least part of that satisfaction was her power to give others pure delight and pleasure.

Thus she would sit down at the piano and touch the chords to melody with no more ado or fuss than when she spread the cloth for our simple meals.

I recall the little room, flooded with music and a twilight of red and gold, as it used to be on those long midsummer evenings. Rosetta and I sit at the open window with a delicate curtain of green leaves and pale-tinted flowers between us and the outer world. A belated fat bee blunders and fumes among the heavy odorous blooms. Their perfume filters in upon our senses as a part of the tranquil atmosphere of that vesper-hour. Beyond the dark broken line of the house-tops I see the sky as a vast lake of rose and silver and green and amber. The setting sun strikes prismatic reflections from the upper windows, flashing and smouldering on the iridescent glass in a blaze of molten gold, and mellowing the weather-stained bricks to a rich warm red. Tiny clouds go drifting by in the translucent azure, like fairy galleons high-piled with a cargo of glittering jewels. And presently a solitary stars shines out meekly like a

beacon of hope set on the topmost peak of the mountains of vain desire.

From within comes the low harmonious strain, issuing from the deepening shadow where the faintly-outlined form of Ella communes as with a familiar spirit. The music steals over us like a drowsy beneficence, lulling all our cares and anxieties, our passions and our pains, to a blissful slumber. I dream and the panorama of my visions is all glorious within and without like the march of human destiny toward its appointed goal of perfection. Life has a purpose grand and strong; Death is but the gloomy portal to a palace of new enchantments in which the spirit, sloughed of the flesh, shall know itself again and be known as it was God-created, and God-given to the least of His poor creatures. There is a song, an old crooning ballad, that Ella used to sing, that I can never hear even now without recalling that halcyon time. The words have escaped me—they were foolish and inadequate words, perhaps—but even as I write the tune rings in my ears again, awakening in my heart all the old sweetly-sad ecstasy and the still quiet happiness in which I used to be steeped and lapped as I listened to it, years ago, in that twilit room, with Rosetta sitting beside me, her hand in mine.

It was during one such evening that Wrathall called. Though it had been quite dark for well-nigh



an hour we had not troubled to light the lamp and could hardly descry one another's faces except as pale indefinite blurs in the mirk. Loudly and harshly the knocking at the outer door broke in upon our reverie. Rosetta uttered a startled cry, and Ella struck a wailing discord. Then she rose and groped her way out; and we heard her interrogating the visitor in the tiny hall. My nerves quivered and contracted as I recognised the voice.

"Have you a match?" asked Rosetta, abruptly withdrawing her hand from mine, and rising with an appearance of fluttering discomfiture. "Light the candles on the piano—quick!"

I was doing her bidding with a trembling haste as Horace Wrathall entered.

"What! All in the dark!" he exclaimed, thrusting back the door so that I was completely eclipsed behind it. "Ha! I had better not move, or I shall knock something down."

I could hear his heavy breathing and picture his open mouth, with its fringe of sodden moustache, as he blinked and grinned at them.

"Ah, that's better!" as the gleam of the candlelight spread over the room. "Now I can see what I'm looking at." And he broke into a snigger.

I forget what we said in the next few minutes. I remember that I was forced, greatly against my inclination, to shake hands with him, and that he gave

me an insolent condescending nod. And I remember how I was tempted to be brutally rude and ribald at his expense and only conquered the tempation by setting my jaws rigidly together and withdrawing to a corner and maintaining a difficult silence.

He made himself very much at home, sitting cross-legged on a spindly chair with his arms folded on its narrow back and his hatchet face propped upon his hands. As he talked and laughed I fell to scrutinising him with a steady critical regard that I now feel to have been cruelly unfair. He was merely an average Briton with the average crude sense of humour, and a colossal belief in his powers of fascination. He was hardly more stupid or vulgar than the majority of men, and any one less fastidiously carping than I might have failed to find any fault in him whatever. He seemed to be good-natured and to be possessed of that hard shallow intelligence which, combined with self-complacency, has an air of being very sagacious and liberal-minded. I divined that to most women and to many men he would appear a very tolerable specimen of his class. But he belonged to the type which to a person of delicate susceptibilities is wholly abhorrent. His noisy self-possession, his way of assuming that you accepted him at his own valuation, his nonchalant habit of taking your approbation for

granted, and above all his comprehensive urbane smile, which claimed an arrogant equality with the best of humankind and expressed a conviction of being able to play the mentor to any circle with which he might choose to be familiar: all these characteristics were an offence to me as much as an evil odour or a horrid dissonance of colour or sound.

"Think I'd forgotten my promise, Rosay?" he said.

"Your promise?" she queried.

"To call. I said I'd look you up, you know. And—well, here I am. And precious hot and tired, too. Had a frightful grind in the City all day."

"And have you ground much?" asked Ella.

"Oh, it's all grist that comes to my mill," said he. (He was one of those men who can never resist an opportunity of quoting a hackneyed phrase.) "I can't complain." He mopped his forehead. "What were you all sitting in the dark for? It's a wonder I knocked."

"But you did—thoroughly," said Ella.

He nodded his head as at a compliment. "I'm pretty thorough in everything I do," he replied. "It's the only way to get on nowadays."

"To get on other people's nerves," I found myself remarking—but not aloud, fortunately.

"Don't let me interfere with whatever you were doing, though," said Wrathall. "You were playing, weren't you, Miss Candlish?"

"Yes."

"You play, Horace, too," Rosetta interpolated quickly. "Won't you give us a tune now?"

"Oh, you can't call it playing, the row I make," said he. "Besides, I'm too hot and fagged. Presently, perhaps, I'll give you a selection. Jove, though, we used to have some rare old sing-songs at Rocklands, didn't us, Rosay? Ever heard old Conover sing 'Rock'd in the cradle of the deep,' Miss Candlish?"

"I don't know Mr. Conover."

"I say, what a privilege! Beg your pardon, Rosay. But when he 'lays him down to sleep' he makes the windows rattle. And when he 'rests upon the wave' you expect to hear a policeman knock to ask if anybody's being murdered."

It pained me that the girls could laugh at these banalities.

"Perhaps Mister Whats'isname sings?" suggested Wrathall.

"I can't," said I. "And I don't."

"Then you should get your hair cut," he retorted. "It misleads people. Or are you only a photographer's lout?"

But this time neither Rosetta nor Ella laughed. And looking at them I made a sudden discovery which they had each made as suddenly. Mr. Wrathall had been drinking; and they had simul-

taneously been smitten with a disquieting perception of that circumstance.

"Well, after all I will do a strum," he said, rising abruptly; and crossed over to the piano. "What shall it be, Rosay?—'Ever of thee'?"

He struck a few crashing chords and burst into song.

Possibly, when he was sober, he had a tuneful if untrained and undisciplined voice; but that night his singing was a desecration of the mood which Ella's soft melodies had induced in us. I could see that the two girls listened in an agony of vicarious shame as he sat there tossing his head and blaring forth the maudlin sickly-sweet sentiments of that old-fashioned mid-Victorian ballad. And I think that as he proceeded he became dimly aware that he was betraying his condition, for he sang with less and less gusto, yet ever more loudly and brazenly.

"Lot o' silly rot!" was his own comment on his performance when he had finished. "'Morn, noon, and night, where'er I may be, Fondly I'm dreaming ever of thee.' As if a fellow hadn't something better to do with his time! Well, thank God, I was never moon-struck in that way! Here, Miss Candlish, you have a go." And he got up with an elaborate caution from the stool.

But Ella would not sing. He seemed a little dis-

concerted as he returned to his former straddling position on the spindly chair. But it was not in his nature to accept a set-back meekly. He sat on and talked, chronicling the small beer of his daily experiences with frequent interlardations of dubious jokes and throaty "Ha, ha's!" till I felt heart-sick to think that I belonged to the same sex as he did. At last he got up, looked at his watch, wondered where his hat and stick were, remembered that he had left them in the hall, shook hands with us all round, and departed in a crescendo of cackling merriment that the slamming of the door behind him cut off abruptly.

When he had gone a constraint fell upon us as we drooped in our places and avoided one another's glances, self-consciously.

"Ella," said Rosetta, forcing the words from her twittering lips with an effort; "I'm sorry I asked him to call."

"That's all right," said Ella cheerily.

"I've never known him to be like that before," Rosetta protested. "He is such a gentleman, really, as a rule." Her eyes were moist and shining with the tears of her distress.

Ella was discreetly silent; and after an awkward interval the conversation flowed along the usual pleasant channels again. But I had remarked that Rosetta's gaze had sought mine with a desperate

entreaty as she attempted to extenuate Horace Wrathall's ill-behaviour, as if she expected me to exult over her. She accompanied me to the door-step to bid me good-night. I hoped she would not speak of what had just happened; but she did.

"Ferdie," she said earnestly, "I hope you don't think that Mr. Wrathall is addicted to that sort of thing."

"It doesn't matter, does it?" I faltered.

"It does matter," she insisted. "I want you to understand that if I had known ——"

"Let's forget all about him," I exclaimed with a touch of impatience. "It doesn't seem to me that he is worth worrying about."

"I will never speak to him again," she declared. "It was disgraceful his coming to the place in that state."

Then I was magnanimous. "Oh, don't be too hard on him," I said. "It's the sort of thing that might happen to any man, once in a life-time."

"I knew him to be—rather—dissipated," she said. "But—not in that way."

I stared. Some bitterly caustic utterance rose to my lips; but I restrained myself. "He's not worth a second thought," said I. "He probably won't have the face to call again, and—well, I must say I am glad."

And he never did call again; nor had his name ever passed the lips of either of us since.

On Sundays it was our practice to make little sallies into the various beauty-spots round about London. And the neighbourhood of London is rich in such. It may be that my sense of beauty is peculiar. I know that it is one which is not shared by the majority of those with whom I have exchanged any confidences on the subject. But to me it has always seemed that since so few of us have ever seen any more of untrammelled Nature than what is left of it in the mountains and the sea it is the windiest kind of talk that insists on finding beauty only where it has been untouched by man. For rightly considered a railway-train is only just as much an artificial product as a wind-mill; and both for me have an æthestic appeal that is not less forcible than the appeal of a green-wood or a water-meadow. I delight in the lamp-lit streets of a great town with their mystery and their picturesque squalor as much as I do in the wild moorland of Scotland or Devonshire. I find in the myriad-gleaming waters of the murky Thames at night as much allurement and romance as in the silvery cascades of a hillside burn. The desolate marshes that lie eastward of London have for me as much charm of a sort in their aching flat solitude and far horizons as the blue expanse of ocean. And I can take joy in the trim, clipped loveliness of a man-made park as well as in the dark majesty of a

sombre stately pine-forest. Indeed I am almost disposed to say that there is nothing in this world which may not be beautiful at some propitious moment. For beauty, after all, is mainly in the eyes of the seer and not intrinsically in the thing seen.

This was a point of view, by the way, that I tried to induce Rosetta to take, but not altogether successfully. And so, after one or two abortive essays, I relinquished the endeavour. It was enough that she should be with me when we visited these scenes. It was enough that she held the lines whilst I pulled up the cool leafy reaches beyond Marlow or Bourne End. To stroll with her through the rippling cornfields into the round fiery eye of the westering sun; to sit with her in a fragrant shade and watch and listen to and revel in the mimic life of bird and insect and green upspringing grass and weed; to follow the winding course of narrow rutty lanes after a flow of summer rain that had flooded them with a thousand dazzling threads of liquid gold, and to peer into those magic mirrors reflecting the wild splendours of the evening sky and showing us a dream of a topsy-turvy world that came true when we raised our eyes: these were joys sufficient in themselves to content the heart of the most exigent lover. And I was content.

My memories of that time are all extraordinarily

vivid, and yet they have no coherence. I close my eyes. And now we are breasting up a breezy hill whose summit rises scarp on scarp to the very gates of Heaven where stand the angels with the flaming swords; now we go down the steep slope hand in hand, laughing for sheer gladness as the strong wind buffets and touzles us and intoxicates our senses with the wine of its pungent savours of the earth. Now we are alone in a green natural arbour upon a sandy knoll with reedy spiny tufts of herbage enclosing us with a fairy fence of tasselled lances, and overhead the interlacing leaves weaving an ethereal pattern on the calm sky. Now we toil heavily but not wearily along the dark road toward the serried lines of twinkling lights that mark the town of our desire, where food and bed and all the cosy homely luxuries that crown the day's rigorous past of bodily ecstasy with the contemplative ruminative peace of a sleepy review of the day's sweet happenings, await us. Each picture is limned in unfading pigments on the walls of the chambers of my imagination for ever, plainly and more instantly recognisable to my inner vision than any painted canvas in a gilt frame that I have raised my mortal eyes from a catalogue to look at.

But during the second month many of our evenings and most Saturday afternoons we devoted to the planning and the purchasing of our future home.

And first we had to find a bricks-and-mortar house that should form a worthy casket for the enshrinement of our ideals. The question of our domicile we settled out of hand. Hampstead was the only possible venue in which we felt that we could face the battle of life together. But Hampstead is genteel with the gentility that is costly, except where it is Bohemian with the Bohemianism that is inconvenient and hardly less expensive. It is also cheap in parts, but there it is slummy and squalid, and we wanted a castle in the air at a rental not exceeding thirty-five pounds per annum. We did not find it. We sought for it in all quarters of old and new Hampstead, as far west as St. John's Wood and as far east as Highgate and as far south as Kentish Town. We "saw over" every size and variety and kind of villa that the perverse ingenuity of the speculative builder has as yet devised. With the "order to view" flourished in Rosetta's hand we knocked up grumpy caretakers and persons-in-charge and followed them through mazy arcana of ugly empty rooms and chilly vaults and kitchens and cellars, and up and down miles on miles of bare, resounding staircases, and out into sunny ruined gardens, until our eyes and our legs were alike weary of the unending quest and the tale of our mean requirements and the secret of our exuberant desires became burdens too heavy for us to bear.

Rosetta displayed an altogether amazing and recondite knowledge of the essentials in this matter of house-hunting. She objected to this kitchen-window because it looked out upon a dreary wall, and to that because the topsoil of the garden was raised a foot above the level of the flooring and would render the lower walls damp. She revealed to my astonished intelligence the infinite gradations of usefulness and the reverse that lurk behind the grinning iron faces of stoves; the ludicrous inadequacy of some dressers and cupboards as compared with the opulent dimensions of others. She was learned in environments and would have nothing to do with any dwelling that was subject to any contingent annoyances from outside in the way of evil odours or disturbances of any sort, or in undesirable eventualities in the form of bells or buzzers or hooters. Very soon I despaired of the castle in the air; but Rosetta pursued her first fond ideal with a radiant unflagging faith in its possible existence that was the last word of optimism. Finally, however, we decided on an ordinary six-roomed habitation in a part of Kentish Town that called itself, with a colourable show of reason, South Hampstead. It was within half an (auctioneer's) mile of the railway-station and fixed Rosetta's choice immutably because it boasted a stained-glass window on the first-floor landing; and "boasted" is quite the right word in

this connection, since in all other respects it was as unpretentious a villa as was ever constructed to deceive the eye with a factitious air of newness out of second-hand materials.

This business settled we engaged upon the purchase of furniture. But first we called Ella into consultation.

"You must draw up a list of what you want," said Ella. "And then strike out everything you can't afford. What remains will consist of indispensables."

"First, then," said Rosetta, as I sat down with pen and paper: "curtains."

"I should never have thought of curtains," I confessed.

"You must have curtains, of course," said Ella.

"I should have thought that one could drag out a miserable existence without them," said I.

"No abode of bliss could possibly be complete without curtains," Ella assured me.

So we went on. And presently it seemed to me that everything I had never heard of was absolutely necessary to the comfort of any house that called itself a home. At last I gave up the unequal struggle with all these sordid actualities and issued my ultimatum. Ella and Rosetta must draw up a list of all the uninteresting indispensable things, estimate their approximate total cost, and hand the result to

me, when I would draw money from the bank and hand it over to them. It would be better, I said, if Rosetta and I concentrated our energies only on those things which did not matter: such things as pictures and vases and other objects of bigotry and virtue. And so it was ordained. And thenceforth all our walks abroad were punctuated by peeps into brilliant shop-windows and dives down obscure byeways in which the bogus antique and the pinchbeck esoteric tempted the unsophisticated on dusty shelves in a darkness made fitfully visible by indifferent and prehistoric methods of illumination. . . .

But it was all joy. And our close preoccupation with the immediate business of our joint future lent wings of light to the flying hours.

"I think we are going to have a storm," said Rosetta.

Her voice was tremulous and her hand shook violently as she set down her glass. I stared at her. Her face had never any colour beyond a faint pink flush in the cheeks when she was unusually excited, but just then it had turned white as milk. And her eyes were so bright and shining that they seemed almost luminous. And her lips were set in a hard crooked line.

"What is the matter?" I asked in amazement.

Her eyelids fluttered, closed; she shuddered. "If it thunders and lightens I shall be ill," she said hoarsely. "It always upsets me."

I glanced around, and up and down, anxiously.

It had grown perceptibly cooler. A wanton wind blew gustily, driving the hot rank air in a quick succession of short sharp puffs that set the trees tossing wildly together, so that the underside of the boughs showed pale against the sombre tones of the upper foliage. A shower of dead leaves and dry twigs and spines came swirling down and raced across the paths like a scurrying elfin army. It grew momently colder. Beyond doubt the air was rife with portents of storm. Northward the horizon was silver-tinted in jagged streaks like the fissures in the side of a white-hot furnace. And in the reflected glare of that strange phosphorescence I saw that the erstwhile glowing purple of the sky was changed to a rusty gold, across which broken wracks of cloud were piling up in feathery outline, plumed and massed, like the cohorts of some celestial cavalry on coal-black chargers. There were livid blue gleams playing across the zenith. Suddenly the lightning flashed, evanescent in effect as the sun-paled glare in the cannon's mouth that precedes the smoke and noise of firing.

There was still no rain, but the mutterings of thunder that had sounded afar off were swiftly ap-

proaching. The wind went sobbing, sighing by, drawing in its train a flying column of dust that eddied up in a prismatic cloud and then fell and covered the smiling festive scene as with an ashen veil.

"Let us go," I said, rising abruptly.

For already the crowd was in full flight toward the nearest shelter of a gimcrack arcade of flimsy painted wood and iron.

We plunged into its midst. And in that moment came the rain to a lifting of the gloom—at first in a heavy measured pattering, then faster and ever faster, until it smote on the thirsty parched earth in a furious steaming reek. Then the tumult paused. The lights winked, many of them went out, the rest flared up again fiercely and then guttered down to a yellow sputter as the darkness of night descended once more and all things lost their shapeliness in the universal welter. But by this time we were under cover on the outer fringe of a shrinking mob that was wedged so tightly together that not one of its units could stir.

Now the sky, from horizon to zenith, was quite obscured by a bronze-tinted haze. The trees crashed and swayed as if they would tear themselves up from their roots. There was a liquid rush of rain and a curtain of fire rent the gloom asunder. A hollow, snarling growl, swelling on the air, rolled up and split

into a thousand furious explosions right above our heads, to a deafening chorus of roars that stunned our senses. The din dwindled down, sank to silence. And in the silence the noise of many waters fell to a gentle pit-pat and trickle. Then the thunder spoke again and a fresh lurid beam blinded us as its echoes reverberated sullenly, till all the prospect seemed to rock and shatter into fragments under the impact of its awful outcry. But once the storm paused as if to take breath in a long-drawn ebbing sigh. In that pause I discovered that Rosetta was screaming like a frightened child. Yet another flash of lightning, more vivid than any that had gone before, irradiated the storm-blown world, lit up the clustered faces of our near companions, and a terrified shriek broke from her.

"There is nothing to fear," I called out aloud in the lull.

But other moans and sobbings and cries pierced the darkness now, blent with hysterical laughter. Fitfully amid the tumult the parched soothing voices of men strove vainly to make themselves heard. The rain came down as if the floor of Heaven had dropped out and rattled on the roof like the tattoo of a thousand drums. The thunder clapped once more and then rumbled away in a slow diminuendo. Again the lightning rived the mirk, revealing for one ghastly moment a galaxy of soft terrified faces,

Some of the women and girls, huddled against their protectors with hidden heads, were half fainting in the extremity of their fear; other bolder spirits were hugging their weaker sisters, kissing, consoling, caressing, laughing down their lamentations.

Rosetta lay on my breast, inert and still. I whispered her name in her ear, kissed her. And she flung her arms about my neck and wailed and wept convulsively.

Slowly the storm abated.

Already the crowd was beginning to disperse; and I became uneasily conscious of many amused glances directed at us as the people filed out into the sodden, wind-wrecked gardens.

"Come Rosetta," I said. "Let us go."

But still she wept and clung to me.

In my overwhelming embarrassment and distress I gazed desperately around. And instantly I saw, over her shoulder, the leering mocking face of Horace Wrathall. He was pausing on his way to stand and regard us with sardonic derision. I suppose my face betrayed the sudden heat of animosity that fired me. For first he scowled at me, and then he smiled with a deliberate joy in my discomfiture.

"Rosetta," I breathed in her ear. "People are staring at us. Here is that fellow Wrathall ——"

And I raised my head to confront him again; and found to my dismay that he had drawn close to us.

"Can I do anything, Mr. Smallpiece?" he murmured suavely.

"No," said I.

But Rosetta had stirred at the sound of his voice and turned quickly and faced him.

"I was saying that if I ——" he began.

"And I said No," was my savage rejoinder.

For an imperceptible space there was a look on his face that seemed the prelude to a blow. He wore evening-clothes, with a long cigar between his teeth and a scarlet flower in his buttonhole. With the worst will in the world I could not just then deny the fellow's good looks; and my swelling hatred at the sight of him mastered my discretion.

"I tell you we don't want you here," I said, "drunk or sober ——"

"Hush!" cried Rosetta, and her hand, laid on my mouth, blocked my speech, as she addressed him. "You are very kind, Horace," she said. "But I am all right now, thank you."

He uttered a short, strained laugh. "Ah, married, I see," he observed derisively, and stalked away.

"Are you really all right now, Rosetta?" I inquired tenderly.

"Oh, Ferdie!" she said reproachfully, "how could you speak to him like that! He looked such a gentleman!"

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST LESSON

KNOWLEDGE of women is one of the things that experience does not teach, but only confounds. I am well aware that this has been said before. Most true things have. And a man gains his first real insight into the mystery of the feminine heart by the one act which often makes it of no further use to him: he marries. Until I married Rosetta I had idealised women. I thought of them as beings of right divine, human only by grace. I was to discover that they are usually worse as well as better than men, simply because their animal instincts are far keener and more highly developed. They are more wholly sexual, more carnal and less passionate; and if only in the matter of maternity much nearer akin to the primitive brute than man is. This instinct of maternity, by the way, has been unduly exalted, I think. After all it is only an instinct that they share with the beasts that perish, and is altogether on a lower plane than, for instance, that obsession of

art to which men will devote their whole lives, and for the sake of which they will crucify their flesh. I may be wrong. It is likely that I shall be told so, even if I am not thought so. I am always being told that I am wrong by persons who inherit their opinions as they inherit the colour of their eyes or hair, and who never speak their own mind because it is entirely empty of aught but echoes. And, anyway, I would sooner be honestly and bravely wrong than dishonestly and cravenly right. . . .

But I did not mean to open the present chapter at all in this wise. One's wedding-day, at least, should not be seized on as an occasion for contention. I wanted to tell you how I felt and to describe as picturesquely and entertainingly as might be all the commonplace incidents of my commonplace excursion into that commonplace sphere of experimental sensation.

We were married in a registry-office, with Ella Candlish as the only witness. I was thankful that it turned out to be such a brief and unceremonious performance. When it was over we three drove to a fashionable West-End restaurant where we partook of a sole and some chicken and an omelette and champagne, very uncomfortably and constrainedly. We toasted one another and were much affected. We uttered appropriate sentiments and were all in a rather choky and maudlin state when we parted.

The day was fair and rather cool for that season of the year. The air was very clear and brisk, so that the outlines of things stood out sharply defined against the harsh staring blue of the sky, across which great clouds drifted in endless slow succession, smoothly round and white as giant snowballs. Shadow and shine alternated swiftly. Now the light was so brilliant upon the trees and houses and people that it bleached all the colour out of them; now it was bleak and wan and grey as on a frosty winter's evening. I remember how my excitement quickened my faculties. How each sight and scent and sound was intensified, almost painfully, to my senses. I can recall with an amazing exactitude the particular aspect each thoroughfare wore that we drove through on our way to the terminus from which we were to start on our honeymoon. London seemed to have been freshly repainted and repolished and redecorated that day; the streets to have been newly swept and garnished and made tidy for the celebration of our nuptials. I remarked on this phenomenon to Rosetta, but though she nodded with an appreciative smile I knew that she did not understand and only thought me fondly fanciful.

We travelled by what I should hope, for the credit of my country, is the worst line in England. And I wished I had not taken first-class tickets. For there is a certain cleanliness about the discom-

fort of the bare wooden third-class carriages which is lacking from the dusty stuffy upholstery of those more costly. Rosetta refused to let me draw down the blinds, lest we should be recognised for a honeymoon couple; and for the same reason she had forbidden me to bribe the guard and so ensure privacy. This dread of being known for what you are is one of the characteristics I like least about English people, by the way. But, as I have already said, one's wedding-day is hardly an occasion for contention, and so I yielded the point—with the result that we shared our compartment with a greasy pursy old man, whom I judged, from the mean stupidity and greed of his expression, to be some captain of industry; and who, it also seemed to me, must either have been a frog in some former state of existence or else was qualifying to become one after his next demise.

We sat opposite one another, also at Rosetta's direction, and I laid my hot cheek against the cold window-pane and stared idly at the passing scene as the engine laboured out of the dusty smoky station into the dusty smoky sunshine.

The City lay under a haze of dust and smoke, like a city of dream, golden and impalpable. Here a spire flashed duskily; here a window glistered and blazed: a star of intolerable glory. Now we were out upon the yellow river. The boats were

passing silently up and down: the noise of the clanking paddles of the steam-craft was whelmed in the rush and roar and rattle of the train. The lazy barges floated softly by; the little boats slept in the cradle of the tide. The noble sweep of the grey embankment melted into the vagueness of the steepled distance. The grim gaunt warehouses and tumbled wharfs offered cloaked and softened outlines to the flaming sky. All this set to the music of the thunder of the bridge. A last rumble and spurt. A lighter note. A tangle of chimney-cowls now, like the twisted trunks of trees whose fruit and flower and foliage were smoke. A glimpse of a broader highway thronged with pigmies. The forest of cowls again. A patch of green space. More chimneys.

A halt.

Then the dust and heat and riot again, din of noises, muddle of vaguely glimpsed objects. "Right behind!" The whistle-note, and hey, away! over the wilderness of streets once more. Broader streets and smaller houses now. A brooding calm over all things. An atmosphere of stagnant smug content. Fewer pigmies. Every now and then a lazy little cart crawling toward us. Gardens and tracts of nondescript ground, neither town nor country. Tumuli of bricks and rubbish. A desolation of coaly arches. Suburbia again, a little greener and

more spruce. A whiff of verdure in the air. A field between two scattered blocks of dwellings. A row of cottages between two open level fields. And then the houses were left behind, and the smiling English country opened out on either hand. Fields green and yellow and brown. Dim cloistral groves and tangs of thicket, under a sweet pure sky. Orchards and farms and sleek estates, with placid cows grazing on the rolling pasture-land, with sheep dotting the hills like gravestones, or scuttling madly from the onrush of the train; with lawns and paddocks and roseries. Whir-rr! A station slithering by, blurred and sudden. Bang! A plunge into darkness and uproar. Whew! The open country-side again, with a wisp of shining river winding mistily away through pollard-trees, and in the distance a grey upstanding church.

Our destination was Coblesea, which is a tiny town in Sussex, midway between two popular cheap watering-places.

From afar, arose a flat expanse of fields and hills, some richly golden, some green as spinach, some a purple brown. Coblesea dawned upon our gaze at last, as a huddle of red tiles and drab walls in a raffle of slender masts against a sparkling sea slashed and mottled with patches of tawny yellow and blue and olive. It was like some long-sought for bourne in a nightmare, in that though we seemed ever to

approach it, it seemed never to draw any nearer to us. By swinging curves and serpentine doublings, through deep cuttings and by way of steep high levels, we wound about and about in its vicinity until I began to despair of reaching our journey's end and leaned back resignedly in my seat. And in that moment we were there. . . .

All our arrangements had been carefully planned beforehand. We had engaged rooms in advance and sent the major portion of our luggage on ahead. For Rosetta had visited Coblesea before, when she was a child; and during one of our talks had drawn such an enticing picture of the place that we had then and there decided to make it the scene of our honeymoon. We were to stay in the house of a distant connection of the Conovers, one Mrs. Durber, who (Rosetta told me) was a rather grand and stately lady but a very excellent cook and housewife. Thus we were free to step out of the train upon the platform with only a kit-bag for me to carry, and to go on foot to our lodgings.

"It looks rather different, somehow," Rosetta observed, as we emerged from the railway station upon a triangular yard paved with brown cobbles and enclosed by an open white fence, which was mainly occupied by half a dozen crazy flies of the frowsy kind that are only discoverable at the less well-known seaside towns. "Smaller, but the air is

just as good. Delicious! Can't you smell the sea?"

"Yes," said I. "And I think it must be afloat with rose leaves." She pressed my arm and laughed delightedly, "Which way?" I asked. "Henceforth —until we get to Mrs. Durber's anyway—you are my guiding star, you know, Rosetta."

"It's so very, very different," she murmured pensively; "that I don't seem to recognise . . . Oh, yes; this is the way." And she led me on.

"You don't mean to say," I cried, "that there is more of Coblesea than is contained inside this three-cornered corral kind of place, do you? That isn't the sea, then?" And I pointed to a puddle.

"The sea is twice as big as that," she assured me gravely.

"Rosetta, Rosetta!" I said. "Remember I am only a simple Cockney. Don't impose upon my innocence."

"First catch your innocence!" said she. "No we don't want a fly," waving aside an importunate driver in a very Joseph's coat of many colours.

"Unless he has a butterfly-chariot," I whispered, and proceeded to quote Mercutio on Queen Mab.

So, she laughing and I spouting in a mock-heroic undertone, we came out upon the borders of the little town. And then she called another halt and gazed perplexedly about her.

"How long ago was it since you were here?" I inquired suspiciously.

"I was only a child. But it was not so very long ago," she answered merrily to my poetic vein. "Everything has got smaller: that's all."

"Yet these trees," said I, indicating an avenue of noble elms, "seem to me to be earthly trees of the most solid and enduring, and not magic beanstalks."

"You confuse me with your chatter," she protested, putting her hands over her ears. "How can I think when you run on so?"

I am glad to recall how gay and light-hearted we were in the moment that we entered Coblesea. That is my excuse for setting down our poor conversation.

In the end Rosetta had to interrogate a comic policeman who looked as if he had strayed out of a pantomime-rally.

"The house is called Sea View," she informed him, as he scratched his fat red neck.

"It is odd," I remarked, "that no one should ever before have hit on that name for a house at the seaside. It seems so appropriate—and so rarely is."

The policeman thought we could not do better than go straight down the High Street and inquire again. "This is the High Street," he explained. "Leastways, it leads into it."

So we set forth on our way down the avenue, under the spreading branches, until we came to a steep narrow thoroughfare lined with ancient houses, the basements of which had been converted into modern shops. On either hand were still narrower byeways which, as we could see, broke suddenly into a rash of inferior new villas, set far back from the pavement behind a double row of weedy saplings enclosed in a sort of wooden cage. But passing by these rather disappointing side-peeps we bore steadily downhill and were presently confronted with a more spacious outlook. The narrow steep thoroughfare abruptly broadened out and formed a winding grey road, under a surprising expanse of sky, and was divided by a sweep of uniform shop-fronts of a most pompous and arrogant kind, with symmetrical rows of mean little windows above them and here and there a square of gravel abutting on the flagged pavement where stood sophisticated imitations of old-fashioned inns introduced to your notice by swining sign-boards on rickety rheumatic posts, with the arms painted in crude white characters on enamelled iron plates.

"Ah, there is the Mount!" cried Rosetta, pointing to a mighty rounded bluff of headland, crowned with a church and some low straggling buildings of grey stone, which soared high above the vulgar slated roofs on our right hand.

And I looked, and dimly understood . . . what I learnt afterwards to understand more fully.

Not many years ago—certainly since Rosetta's former visit—Coblesea had been an old-world village, even as she had described it to me: a way-back place, squatting humbly at the foot of this high hill like Lazarus at Dives' gate. It had been an honestly-poor hamlet, then, its native good manners uncorrupted by evil communication with that world of which the frog-faced City man in the train had been the living symbol. There had been no smoke-stacks, such as I saw here and there in the middle distance, or gasworks, or gantries, to come between the wind and its rusticity then. The august seat of learning on the summit of the bluff, its colleges comprised in those time-worn straggling buildings of grey stone, and its swarming new generations of boys, had beamed down upon it kindly; and it had fed, abundantly, on the crumbs from that rich table-land. But now it had fallen on evil days of prosperity. It was progressive, up-to-date, go-ahead, and had a hundred other abominable modern characteristics to recommend it to the favour of that rabbity class which burrows in close-pent houses. The everlasting hill still sheltered the futile foolish huddle of tawdry habitations as it had sheltered the fruitful valley. Scarp on scarp of broken upland still lifted their heights to the sullied, shamefaced sky; and the

lonely church-spire, poised midway between earth and heaven, toward which all lesser things seemed to converge, still dominated the outlook and drew the gaze irresistibly, as if dumbly, eloquently pleading with the silly people to cast a thoughtful glance in its direction now and then, and to pause before the infinite, insoluble mysteries of time and space whose issue it was fain to point out with a finger of stone and beside which their purblind preoccupation with the petty concerns of their unfledged circumscribed existence was as the heedless breeding of creeping small things in the bed of a sun-dried watercourse.

I perceived then, with a heavy sense of oppression, that the last state of the Coblesea mind was far worse than that former state in which it had browsed and drowsed its way to the grave in placid unthinking contentment of body and soul; for then, at least, its life had had a meaning and a purpose, though it knew it not; and now it had none. Beggars on horseback! thought I. But these silly beggars are not even mounted on flesh-and-blood horses. Might they not rather be likened unto those riders on the wooden steeds of a merry-go-round, if there were any movement at all in their lives: which there did not seem to be? And was it not an amazing thing (thought I) that though there be so many worlds, and all of them so small, these stupid oafs are satisfied to inhabit only one out of the many whilst all

are free to every one to explore and exploit? And then I reflected that maybe the smallest microcosm contains within its little shell as far-reaching and profound interests as the largest macrocosm; that the moss-grown, immemorial pebble which we kick aside out of our path, uncovers sometimes as earnest and strenuous a world of struggling suffering creatures as did the French Revolution; that the least among us, stooping carelessly to pluck a humble flower, may drag up a mighty root that dislocates a vast commonwealth made up of a myriad infinitesimal units, each one crawling with parasites outnumbering in multitude the millions of humankind. So that, after all, this small world of Coblesea might not be so relatively small, despite the disproportionate effect of its sudden ridiculous pretensions in the face of that mighty headland under the vast arch of the sky.

"I offer the usual price—a penny," said Rosetta, peering curiously into my face.

"I was thinking ——" I began, and checked myself. "Mightn't we pursue our inquiries a little further with advantage?" I suggested.

"This place has grown so," said Rosetta.

"I thought you said that everything was so much smaller. No; I understand. It is only a big collection of little things now, as most towns are. But I am grateful for the Mount."

"We will sit up there to-morrow."

"Like god and goddess on Olympus," I said. "But in the meantime I could do with something less ethereal than Hippocrene."

"What is that?"

"Tea," said I. "Here is the Post-office. Let us go in and ask questions."

So we did. And the maiden of haughty mien bit her pencil and opined that we should require a guide. Afterwards we discovered that all good Cobleseans made it the rule of their lives to encourage local industries in this way. You were never permitted to do anything without assistance, if assistance were procurable at a price, unless the thing you wanted to do involved some serious hard work and then any form of co-operation was discouraged.

"But it faces the sea, I know," ventured Rosetta. "Couldn't we find it if ——?"

"You're thinking of some other 'Sea View,' then," replied the maiden. "Mrs. Durber lives in Mullingar Terrace."

"It faced the sea when I was here last," said Rosetta stoutly.

"How long ago was that?"

"Fifteen years."

"A great many houses faced the sea in those days that are streets and streets away now," we were in-

formed with a superior smile. "Coblesea is the coming place in the South of England."

This was direfully disilluding. But we thanked the maiden and withdrew and presently impounded the services of a small but very sage youth who conducted us to Mullingar Terrace which we discovered to be one of those very rows of inferior new villas debouching from a narrow byeway, which had afforded us such disappointing side-peeps.

"But this is certainly not the house I remember," cried Rosetta in dismay.

"This is Sea View where Mrs. Durber lives," said the youth.

And just then the door of the house before which she had halted flew open; and a stout dumpy lady appeared on the threshold.

"Ah, here you are, at last!" she called out. "I've been waiting and watching for you ever since I heard the train come in."

I stared at the stout dumpy lady and then at Rosetta. Could this vulgar florid person with the button nose and flabby mottled cheeks be the rather grand and stately Mrs. Durber who was such a good cook and housewife?

"Come in," she said, waddling down the garden-path toward us. "Your luggage has arrived all safe and sound, and the kettle is a-boiling like

anything. And is this your good gentleman, my dear?"

She panted and patted her middle as she opened the wicket-gate.

"I should never have known you, Mrs. Durber," Rosetta exclaimed.

"Time don't stand still with any of us," said Mrs. Durber. "You've altered a bit since you was five or six years old, my dear. And how's you're dear father? But come in, come in."

And in a dazed transport we followed her into the house.

I noted as we stood on the mat that the hall-floor was covered with excruciatingly shiny, slippery oil-cloth of a very gaudy pattern. At the end of the passage was a curtain of glass beads and midway was a bamboo-table bearing an art-pot of an arsenical green containing an imitation fern, made apparently of plush. And everything, as Wrathall would have said had he known the phrase, was in a concatenation accordingly.

We passed into the parlour, airy and spacious, and at the first sight of it I recoiled.

Everywhere my vision was assailed by hideous dissonances of colour, scarlet being the dominant hue. Chairs, sofa, and a little squat ottoman in the centre of the room were all covered with scarlet rep. There were scarlet parallelograms on the walls and scarlet

roses strewn upon the deep blue background of the carpet. There was scarlet juxtaposed with green and purple, and scarlet rioting amid shades of brown and yellow and pink. On the great broad mantel-shelf—loaded thickly with pearl shells, plaster statuettes, gaunt vases a-quiver with prisms, china dogs and cats, and unsexable humans—flaunted two Japanese fans of German make, a hideous discord in scarlet and lemon. The pictures, being mainly illustrations of Biblical narrative or illuminated texts, had due regard to Oriental prodigality of colour. Scarlet geraniums in nice clean pots of red earthenware, shared the window-sill with yellow calceolarias, pink fuchsias, hard white stock and blue lobelias. It was colour running to delirium and madness.

I leaned back upon the squat ottoman with a feeling of nausea and involuntarily closed my eyes. Mrs. Durber had bustled out of the room immediately on seeing us seated, and, as she termed it, comfortable.

"Don't you feel well?" asked Rosetta, plumping down beside me—she could not help it: the ottoman bounced under us—and laying her hand on mine.

I opened my eyes. "How are you feeling yourself?" I inquired, striving to be playful.

"Well, it is rather a shock," she confessed. "And I don't understand it a bit. Sea View, as I remem-

ber it, was a bundly little cottage with queer-shaped rooms and deep cavernous fire-places and precipitous stairs. It was always in twilight and the tiny windows were filled with old-fashioned homely plants. There was a grandfather's clock, a lot of old brass and copper hanging on the walls. And in the kitchen, hanging from the glossy black rafters, were hams in linen jackets and long strings of onions. It was Heaven, simply. Rather stuffy and gloomy and smelly, but indisputably Heaven!"

"And this place," said I, "is ——"

"Hush!" murmured Rosetta, laying her finger on my lips and laughing. "Still, it doesn't matter, I suppose. We shall be out of doors most of the time." Her face was puckered with anxiety as she brought it close to mine, though she still smiled. "Come, cheer up!" she said. "Though I am disappointed, too."

"Yes," said I. "And what of the rather grand and stately lady?"

"She certainly has shrunk—and dilated," said Rosetta. "I suppose my childish eyes must have magnified her. She seemed quite a fine dame, years ago."

At that instant she returned. "Perhaps," she began breathlessly, "you would like to see ——"

"Oh, no. First," interposed Rosetta, "what has become of the dear little cottage, Mrs. Durber?"

"That was pulled down a matter of eight years ago. And time, too! This ——"

"What a pity!" exclaimed Rosetta.

Mrs. Durber's face lengthened with astonishment till her nose and mouth resembled a note of exclamation.

"It had to come down," said she. "And glad we were, I can tell you. Nasty, poky, dark little hole! Who would ever have come to stay in a place like that?"

"We would. We did," replied Rosetta.

Mrs. Durber stiffened with resentment. "Well, there's no accounting for tastes," she said tartly. "You'd better see your rooms, I think."

So we followed her upstairs to the first-floor with misgivings which, it is sufficient to say, were amply justified by what we beheld there. Having ushered us in, Mrs. Durber at once left us.

I stood regarding Rosetta blankly.

"Well, after all, it doesn't matter," she said as before, with a touch of petulance. "Don't make a tragedy of it, Ferdie. You've hurt Mrs. Durber's feelings, as it is."

Then I rallied my sense of humour to my aid. But I felt that the first fine flavour of our honeymoon was irretrievably lost in these surroundings. Instead of champagne I had been fobbed off with ullage; instead of a crystal goblet I must be content



with majolica. It was impossible for me to agree with Rosetta that it did not matter. But I dissembled.

I had not yet been married six hours; but already I had mastered the first and last lesson of connubiality. And I dissembled.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BRIDAL EVE

"MOST things that we laugh at should really make us cry," I observed to Rosetta sententiously.

And I think she was amused, as she had cause to be. I did not think so, then: no such misgiving crossed my mind. But now that I am eons older it seems to me that she must have been. Secretly amused, a good deal perplexed, perhaps, and rather vexed as well by my pompous mode of expression; for the words fell from me into the deep silence with a ponderous incisiveness, like a heavy plummet of lead into still water at the bottom of an abysmal well. I imagine her as being torn between a suspicion that only my naïve sincerity rescued me from being more than slightly absurd, and a doubt lest it was her own inability to rise to my heights which instilled her with that tendency toward uproarious hearty healthy girlish mirth. . . . And now I realise fearfully that I am approaching very near to the most difficult and intimate part of my narrative. My own courage (to

give my hardihood a more dignified name than it may seem to deserve) daunts me. That is why I am reaching out tentatively in an endeavour to seize on and present, if I can, her point of view as well as my own; though I am very conscious that I may never have succeeded in grasping her point of view at all.

As I spoke I furtively examined with my fingers the extreme tip of my nose which was burning and glowing and throbbing intolerably. I recognised the painful symptom only too well. There would be a red unsightliness there tomorrow. And my foreboding of this afflicted me with an overwhelming sense of impending tragedy. I should have dreaded the deadly gripe of fever at my throat far less.

"I suppose so," she said absently.

"On the other hand," I continued, letting my hand fall from my face, "the things that distress us most are often the things that most appeal to others' sense of humour if not to our own. And they ought to appeal to our own sense of humour, too."

"Ah," said she; "but a sense of humour is something that women never possess, isn't it?"

"I have never said so, Rosetta."

"But doesn't every man think so?"

"Every woman thinks that men think so, because they mostly take their opinions of men from men who have the least right to express any. But that is always the way. Take that same sense of humour

for instance. The people who are always laughing have very little, as a rule. A sense of humour is apt to make you sad rather than jolly. It makes you realise what a few good jokes there are. And how the best of them are no laughing matter. That we, for example, should have come all this way to find love in a cottage and have only found Mrs. Durber in a pinchbeck villa is really richly comic. And yet it doesn't amuse us."

"It would take more than that to make me sad, though, on my honeymoon," said she.

"Exactly," said I. "Where the joke comes in is in its exasperating us. Angry people aren't sad."

"But it doesn't exasperate me." And she laughed. "Does that prove my sense of humour is deficient?" she asked, quizzically.

"Well, I don't think it does," I rejoined, and laughed too. "It seems to me that I must be the owl to be talking in this strain at all at such a time."

She turned upon me with an eager radiant face. "Now that is where you really are remarkable," she exclaimed. "You can laugh at yourself. I can only laugh at other people."

"At me?" I suggested unwisely.

She hesitated a moment, then answered solemnly: "Oh, I don't think I ever laugh at you, Ferdie. Except ——"

"Except—when?"



"No. I never do. That is to say, not at you personally, but only at your sex generally."

This was enigmatic; but I thought I understood. And I felt a little piqued. What I had just said about the absurdity of talking in that strain on our honeymoon was said in the confident hope that she would deny it was anything of the sort. And she had not denied it.

I sat, staring moodily between my hunched knees, at the darkling prospect.

We had climbed up on the Mount, after tea, and were sitting there, side by side, on the short crisp grass, watching the open seascape.

It was a scene of sylvan solitude that encompassed us. The lonely headland cut Coblesea off from our view. Everywhere the verdant fields stretched away serenely peaceful under the melting blue. We had strolled thither through flocks of tame fat sheep that would not stir until we came within a yard of them, and cattle that stubbornly stuck in our path so that we could smell, as we passed, the hot rank odour of their steaming bodies. Diving up and down in eccentric swoops and lunges along the line of the cliff's edge, a school of gulls had borne us screaming company. Overhead, wheeling and cawing, went a colony of ragged black rooks with some younger birds of a rusty brown colour streaming away in their wake.

Now a haze was stealing up over the waters out of the horizon.

Somewhere in the far distance, out of sight, the syren of a steamer hooted mournfully. And the long-drawn-out bass note seemed to startle the stillness and silence into sudden movement and sound. A covey of dark birds rose in a cloud from a furrowed field on our right. The hovering gulls went streaming and screaming seaward. Over the rounded brow of the incline the blob bodies of the sheep bobbed up jerkily one by one and disappeared. Against the plumbago blue of the sky a great horned cow stood up with her neck outstretched, sniffing the little billows of mist that floated up to her. She lowed, and at her lowing there was an outburst of bleats, the deep staccato barking of a lonely sheep dog, a harsh din of birds.

Then the setting sun flamed up with an expiring brilliance, and the light and shade of the glooming prospect showed crudely, vividly. A hundred trivial objects, hitherto disregarded, leapt at once into amazing prominence: a broken vestige of rail, cow-clats, a curious chalky fissure in the turf. From contemplation of these near details my gaze passed to an ampler outlook, embracing all the wide scape and sky: the patterned pastures, sweeping away, clothed in a luminous mist, bright eyes of yellow light peeping out from clumps of trees, the line of

the railway like a straight grey scar cleaving relentlessly through the green fields, a tiny train like a long glow-worm hurtling toward a muddle of signals, yellow, red and green. That tumult of animal sounds died slowly down, dwindled to an occasional protesting bark or bellow or bleat. Outlines seemed to become less stark, to resume their normal vagueness.

I seized Rosetta's hand and pulled her gently down toward me.

"No, Ferdie. You don't really want to kiss me," she whispered, resisting.

And it came upon me in a blinding flash of self-revelation that I did not, indeed.

And now I am in the very lists of the prime difficulty that has faced me from the very outset of this piece of introspection. I loved Rosetta, as I believe, fondly, devotedly. And yet she had never stirred me to those yearnings, those passionate longings that I had read and dreamed so much about. I was never irresistibly impelled to embrace her, to kiss or caress her. I liked the feel of her soft warm hand in mine. I liked the feel of her soft warm body nestling up to me. And there were moments when our lips met in which I was filled with a warm faintness of desire. But not once in all our intercourse had I been able to lose myself utterly in the thought of her; not once had I been able to rid myself of a

certain constraining self-consciousness. If when our cheeks touched, a straying tress of her hair tickled my ear I was always acutely aware of the irritation, and had much ado to restrain myself from rubbing the itching place. If, when I held her close, some hard part of her dress, a button or a piece of gimp, arrided my flesh I was instantly incommoded and miserably sensible of my physical discomfort. I had heard that a beautiful girl in the arms of a true lover weighs no more than a feather; but if I held Rosetta in my arms and she leaned on me and I had no support to my back, at once I felt the strain of her weight and could hardly bear the pain that the effort to maintain my balance cost me, whilst I sat in that stiff erect posture. I had often stayed in an attitude of dire muscular distress for some minutes that had seemed like hours of torture, rather than shift or re-adjust my precious burden. And all the while, in addition to my bone-agony, I had suffered also under a grievous sense of humiliation in that I could be aware of any agony at all. Was I exceptional? I do not know. But I have read banal jests in vulgar prints that incline me to believe I was not. And I wonder: Is all the world in a conspiracy about this thing that is called Love? Or am I lacking in some vital quality that alone can turn a weak imperfect man into a strong perfect lover?



But here I feel that I tread upon delicate ground; and I am tempted to strike out what I have just written, more especially as I know that I cannot hope to express myself in unmistakable and unequivocal language, can indeed only venture to indicate my meaning in the vaguest terms, trusting that my experienced readers' intelligent sympathy will help them to grasp its full significance. And I would strike it out if I did not feel that I am telling a part of a certain important truth for the first time, and that to omit so much would be to stultify myself and frustrate my object. Though, as some one has pointed out, it takes two to tell the truth: one to speak and the other to hear.

I remember that, as I sat beside my virgin bride that soft summer night, I was oppressed by a sense of the inadequacy and the puerility of my emotions. I had, I suppose, trusted to the instincts of the moment and the mood to teach me the arts of love. And when the moment came it was all a mystery to me still. It came upon me with a sort of tragic fatuity that I felt frightened and ashamed. That I tried to whip my gentle affection into a devouring flame of passion and could only compass a twittering sentimentality. I remember that the shadow of my degradation was so heavy upon me with its poignancy of regret for some fundamental dulness and obtuseness in my nature that all the white heat of

my imagination was unable to fire into a divine impulsion of flesh and spirit: I was so grotesquely unhappy and so consumed with a shuddering misery that I ransacked the purlieus of my memory for some half-forgotten fragments of love-poetry which had used to move me to an amorous ecstasy; and I remember, with a pang that sickens me by its reminder of the ludicrous futility of my behaviour, how I could only light on some sophisticated lines to this effect:—

And though, in blindness, he remained unconscious of that guiding,
And things provided came without the sweet sense of providing,
He testified this solemn truth, while frenzy desolated,
Nor man nor Nature satisfies whom only God created.

Over and over again I chanted these jingling couplets whilst I held Rosetta's hand in a lukewarm clasp and, concerned with the incipient tragedy of my facial disfigurement, seemed to absorb through the pores of her flesh something of the secret disgust of her soul.

"Let us go back," she said abruptly, scrambling to her feet. "Your teeth are chattering. I am getting cold too. And this darkness makes me sad."

CHAPTER IX

THE FIRST QUARTER OF THE HONEYMOON

I SAT alone in a desolate place within a stone's throw of the sea. The pale yellow sand was scorching to the touch. The noontide sun shone down upon me with a pitiless unwinking glare. All about me the loose soil was broken up with here a patch of rusty bramble and furze and there a tiny plateau spread with verdant mossy turf as with a green table-cloth. And everywhere were spines and tufts of reedy wiry grass in bushy tussocks interpersed between wandering rancid growths of brackish-looking weed and wilted flower. A kind of rude stockade had been erected, some long while since, on the margin of the moorland and the beach, and its dismembered ruins still remained, though in places the sand and the shingle had almost submerged it, leaving only the heads of a few posts and stakes and some bristling tangles of plaited wire visible, along the billowy line of demarcation between the fruitful earth and the barren foreshore.

A week had passed since Rosetta and I had come to Coblesea together on our honeymoon. And now, in its first quarter, I was alone. I felt more alone than ever Crusoe on his desert island could have felt. For he (according to the rhyme) was monarch of all he surveyed and at any rate must have had some cause for self-congratulation in the fact that he had been saved from wreck and death, whereas I was a castaway beyond the pale of even my own self-respect and had no cause for rejoicing whatever. The ruins of man's handiwork that lay strewn about me might have symbolised the overthrow and the laying-waste of all my hopes. I was alone, as usually it is only given to a child to be alone, with a sense of complete alienation from the common interests of my humankind, with a feeling upon me that there was an element of irrevocableness, of finality, in my plight beyond which there could be no possible bright future in which I might conceive myself as having any sort of place, playing any sort of part, however humble and obscure. I was literally stunned by the cumulative weight of the many small mishaps and minor ills amounting to one vast misfortune which had befallen me. I was sick unto death.

Looking back I shrink appalled from the task which confronts me of trying to piece together my fragmentary recollections of that period of supreme

wretchedness. The imaged events of that first disastrous week of my new married life are all broken and jagged in my mental picture-gallery like the chaotic parts of a kaleidoscope from which the unifying medium is lacking. It was a time of bleak numbing disillusion, of utterly unrelieved and untempered gloom. I had never before, I have never since, been so stupendously unhappy. I was steeped to my lips in black misery. And it was all so unexpected, so contrary to what I had looked forward to, to what every tradition and convention had taught me to look forward to. I had anticipated it as a time of pure joy, a golden time of rapturous dalliance, a time of ripe fruition and gratification heralding a new era of contentment and peace. And instead it had proved a time of bitter anguish, of scalding searing tears, of maddening self-reproach, of feverish unrest and vain-longing and dissatisfaction and angry complaint. It was a mean time, a bestial time, a degrading and disgusting time.

But my only hope of making myself in the least clear to the comprehension of my reader (which I visualise as a frowning, startled, doubtful comprehension) lies in my power to school myself to a strict and austere and impartial frame of mind, wherein I shall be able to tell a plain tale in plain terms, categorically and in due chronological order. And even

so I am not confident of compassing my end. Therefore I must yet again claim your indulgence.

Let me see.

I woke on the morrow of my wedding-day at a late hour. The sun was shining in fine-drawn mote-flecked beams round the edges of the drawn blinds and through the curtains, tracing a fantastic pattern of speckled checkered gold on the gaudy carpet. I slipped instantly and furtively out of bed and then turned shyly and looked at Rosetta. I was relieved to discover that she still slept. And then I was a little shocked at perceiving that her colourless face wore a sullen and a harsh expression, as if she brooded over a great wrong in her dreams. The bedclothes were drawn up to her chin and her head lay cushioned in her abundant shining hair upon the pillow. The tight-lipped mouth was firmly shut, the heavy jaws set so rigidly that the muscles showed through the waxen pallor of her skin. Her soft rounded cheek rested on her clenched hand that pressed deeply into her satiny flesh and somehow distorted her face, so that it seemed to accuse and threaten me, in spite of her closed blind eyes. I turned away, strangely repelled, almost afraid, at the sight of her lying there and looking so implacable and forbidding.

I had ascertained overnight that there was no bathroom in the house, and at present I did not see

my way to extemporising a makeshift out of the usual ewer and basin. So I had to be content with laving my hands and face; and this I did with the utmost caution, in deadly tremulous fear lest I should arouse Rosetta. And somehow my stealthy movements made me feel, as no doubt they made me look, like a spy and an intruder in that room. But even that uneasy ridiculous feeling was preferable to the feeling of discomfiture which I foresaw would be mine if I woke her before I was decently clad. It seemed to me, as I prowled about on tiptoe, the most important thing in the world that Rosetta should not open her eyes upon me until I was fully garbed. Once she stirred and muttered as I made a sharp noise and I stood in a kind of vertigo of apprehension, a cold sweat breaking out upon me, my body prickling and burning from my scalp to my toes in a tremulous access of shame . . . until with a sigh she composed herself to sleep again.

I am not a very vain man. That is to say I have very little pride in my person. And so it was not until I gave a final glance into the glass that I took a full and minute view of my reflection. And then I uttered a groan of dismay. I had forgotten my foreboding of an impending facial disfigurement (I must be euphemistic here). But now it was recalled to me in the mocking spectacle I confronted. All my worst apprehensions were fulfilled. I was hide-

ous. I was a comic horror. My nose was swollen and inflamed and shining so that it dwarfed all my other features and transformed my whole countenance into a lickerish mask of derision. And surely Fate never played a more cruel practical joke on a newly-wedded man than that! I felt a violent physical nausea as I gazed and shuddered and reflected on the figure of fun I must cut presently beside the fair and radiant Rosetta. And as my ready imagination conjured up the covert grin, the averted face, the irrepressible giggle, that my appearance in public was likely to provoke: even the stolid impassivity veiling a secret smile such as that which is wreathing the lips of my reader at this moment, I am speaking but the cold truth when I say that I would have welcomed, that I prayed for, any sudden visitation which would have stretched me dead and so dignified me, then and there. Even in the retrospect it hurts me damnably to dwell on this loathsome mischance which reduced me to the level of a farcical butt at a time when every instinct of my nature clamoured to express itself, if not in a romantic and imposing, at last in the seemliest possible habit of body. You may laugh—you will, of course, as I am doing—but I had been right when I said to Rosetta that the things which are laughed at should very often make us cry. To this hour I choke and fume with an impotent rage against that wanton

malignity of circumstance, when I recall what that humiliating obscene disfigurement meant to me that dreadful morning. My wounded sensibilities seemed to be bleeding to death as I gazed, transfixed with a despair which was all the more tragic because it was so sublimely ridiculous, before my mirror.

I was all the more eager to escape from the room before Rosetta should wake and behold me. For mingled now with my feeling of vague shame at the impropriety of my being in her sleeping presence was a more abject shame in the thought that my ignominious and grotesque affliction made my intrusion there a profanation of her innocence and beauty by the unspeakably disgusting contrast my own accidental ugliness afforded.

I stole from the room as if I had been a thief committing sacrilege before God's altar in a noble cathedral, and went softly downstairs. But softly as I went Mrs. Durber heard my footsteps and pounced out and intercepted me in the passage with a sly abashed face and downcast ogling eyes.

"Did you know the time now?" she inquired.

"About ten, isn't it?" I said airily, with my hand at my face.

She nodded, with a half-smile. "But I thought I wouldn't disturb you," she whispered with an unctuous chuckle. "Your good lady getting up?"

"No. She's still asleep," I replied hurriedly, and

reached for my hat. "I shall go for a little saunter before breakfast, I think."

"D'you think I might venture to give her a call?"

"Yes, do," said I, still masking my disfigurement. "I shall not be long."

One end of Mullingar Terrace abutted on an open tract of waste land, and I bent my steps in that direction. The fresh air and the sunshine, combined with exercise, were as balm to my lacerated nerves; and soon I began to feel my own man again. But as I recovered my composure and wore round to a more stable view of things, I also became oppressed by a new strange sense; a sense of heavy loss. I felt that something had passed out of the entity which I had hitherto supposed to be my completed and indestructible and, in any large sense, unalterable self which I should never regain. And it had left me a different man. I did not feel older or wiser, that I remember; but oddly and radically different. I seemed to have exchanged my own individuality for that of some other being who curiously resembled me and yet was a distinct and unfamiliar personality. It was as if I had become newly intimate with a perfect affinity who yet had not all things in common with me, and such things as he had he had either in excess or not quite so fully developed. I had not shed any innocence; I am not sure that I had any innocence to

shed. But I had shed something; and that I may call, for lack of a better term, the sex-illusion. And the loss of that darkened and contracted my mental purview. My outlook on life had imperceptibly narrowed to a meaner conception. The things of this world had lost something of their pristine glory and splendour. Human nature was no longer possessed, even at its best, of those heroic god-like attributes with which my fancy had hitherto endowed it; its possibilities were reduced in scale to such modest dimensions that I suddenly felt that I was equal to any part in the drama of life that might hereafter be allotted me. It did not seem such terrific, grand drama as it had. It was on a lower, grosser plane altogether. The psychic interest bulked less strong; the flesh was all-important. Indeed the animal in man seemed to matter a great deal to my altered view; it mattered far more than I had deemed possible. And with this vulgarising and debasing and coarsening of my ideals there came to me an acute perception of the inherent likeness of all men to all other men, of all women to all other women. People were not better or worse than one another, but merely different, and not so very different after all. It was a cynical thought, and like all approaches of cynicism was, at the first blush, comforting and consoling. It rendered high aspiration ridiculous. It scoffed

at the bare notion of a soul of good in things evil. It exalted the body above the spirit, denied to the spirit any real power of governance in matters mundane. I remember that I told myself that the soul created of an inscrutable God never more truly expressed itself than in the voice of the dog that bays the moon, it knows not why. I discovered myself to be smiling complacently as I turned over these new concepts of our immortal destiny in my mind and settled on the conviction that everything was vastly overrated in a vastly overrated universe. Life was a trivial silly business, when all was said and done; and Death but the blowing out of a feeble candle that leaves behind it just a pale vapour and a passing stench, and then is gone for ever. I felt as if I had been rudely shaken out of a long sleep and should never again dream the gorgeous dreams that I had mistaken for realities. My eyes were open at last and I saw aright; and nothing was worth seeing.

When I returned to our lodging I had forgotten my disfigurement; but Rosetta's first glance recalled it to my remembrance. She was waiting in the parlour with a book in her hands which she had not been reading, for she held it upside down. And I wondered, with my new accession of cynicism upon me, why she had troubled to catch it up at the sound of my footstep only to lay it down as I

appeared. She came round the table and greeted me by putting her two hands on my two shoulders and kissing me. I was sure that she did not really want to kiss me, and I wondered again why she did that. But I returned her salutation with an elaborate display of fervour; and then, Mrs. Durber bumping at the door with a tray, we sat down to breakfast on opposite sides of the table.

Mrs. Durber was, as Rosetta would have said, a trial. She observed punctiliously all the prehistoric rules of the game of love as they are interpreted by commonplace minds. She made a prodigious noise before ever she intruded upon us. And all the time she was in our company she preserved a stolid countenance, and an immutable silence, save when she leapt to answer our questions with a grave laboured matter-of-factness and a lurking grin which seemed to say: "I know what is in your hearts, my children, and very well you hide it".

That first day and the second passed in a sunlit monotony of idleness and boredom which we were each desperately anxious not to appear to wish to mitigate by any honest avowal of our true feelings. I remember also how we skirted the dangerous subject of my facial disfigurement as gingerly and warily as sailors circumnavigate an uncharted sea. But I know that Rosetta was as morbidly conscious of the absurdity of my appearance as I was myself;

and that my mere proximity was a source of incessant irritation to her. Very tactfully, too tactfully—for tact is only of service when it is employed upon the stupid and obtuse, and must always carry a veiled suggestion of insult to the alert intelligence of any intuitive person—she lured me from the more crowded haunts of our fellows into the solitudes where she alone could be affected by the sight of my disgusting affliction, and had not to bear with me the ribaldry of unsympathetic outsiders as well as the tiresome burden of my incongruous companionship. Perhaps you think that I do her a rank injustice in this matter and gauge the intensity of her feelings by the measure of my own about this sickening evil. But you will see presently that I do not. And I have only troubled to insist so much on this incidental of our unhappy association because I know that we were both equally racked by a mutual antipathy toward each other, which only the utmost exercise of our self-control could restrain us from venting in an open quarrel.

And on the third day we did quarrel.

The dispute arose in some such way as this: I do not pretend to be very exact about it.

As we left the house after breakfast and turned into the High Street we blundered into a party of rather soiled and dingy Cockney troubadours, two

of them carrying a harmonium between them, whilst the rest had various other musical instruments under their arms. Their general air of shabbiness and slack disheartenment, coupled with a strong suggestion of ineradicable commonness which pervaded the whole *entourage*, did not promise us any very sprightly or refined entertainment; but I turned impulsively to Rosetta and suggested that we should follow them and witness their performance.

"It will be much pleasanter up on the Mount," she objected.

"Well, the Mount will be there all day, and to-morrow, and the day after that," I pointed out.

"Yes," said she; "but by that time it will be three days older and so shall we. We can't afford to waste any of our honeymoon, Ferdie."

I looked at her doubtfully. She invariably affected this overweening desire for my unrestricted and exclusive society; and I knew it to be entirely disingenuous, not only for the reason I have given already, but because I was aware that in reality I bored and exasperated her. I wished she had been more honest with me. I believed that she would have welcomed the distraction I proposed but for my grotesque unsightliness. Had she been alone she would have been all agog to listen to these mummers.

"All right," I said, in what I realised was a fatu-

ously tender tone. "But aren't you afraid I shall begin to weary you soon?"

She raised her eyebrows and pouted: this grimace was intended to express a demure reproach; but was not quite successful.

"Of course, if you would prefer ——" she murmured.

"My darling!" I exclaimed. "You know that my supreme joy is to be with you, and that I resent the presence of any third parties as a desecration of our sacred communion."

I had got into a habit of uttering these florid sentiments in a playful way, and of uttering them with a far better grace than any sincerity could have lent me. But on this occasion I was uneasily conscious that a sardonic inflexion of undue emphasis had crept into my tone. My words did not ring boldly true. It seemed almost as if I were sneering at Rosetta and burlesquing myself. I saw her wince and set her lips tightly together.

"Well," she said slowly; "perhaps we shall enjoy our solitude all the more afterwards if we first deny ourselves that particular blessed privilege of our newly-fledged love and mingle with the mere herd for a time."

And then it seemed to me that if my high-flown utterance had sounded slightly sardonic her rejoinder was frankly derisive. She rasped it out with a

rancorous relishing gusto. I bit my lip, and a silence rose up between us like a high thick wall, separating us from one another.

And in that moment I was soused in a cold puddle of despair. I had a panic-stricken feeling as I struggled to recover my equilibrium, as if some tide of calamity were sweeping down upon me and all my soul were being overwhelmed in some mighty cataclysm of irrevocable disaster which was to influence and change the current of both our lives henceforward for evermore.

We went down to the beach where the sun was shining merrily on the glittering, flashing sea, and a crowd of holiday folk promenaded back and forth on the smooth esplanade, the light attire of the men and the gay colours of the women's dresses and parasols imparting an air of carnival to the scene. It was not much of an esplanade, as esplanades go nowadays. For two or three hundred yards it presented a spacious imposing expanse of white chalky roadway and asphalted pavements and broad parade, entrenched behind a red railing, and studded with square trim flower-beds and clumps of shrubbery and wooden shelters fashioned like châlets, and broad sloping benches. But east and west, at either end, beyond the confines of the newer town, this esplanade degenerated upon a narrow flat-topped breakwater which in one direction ceased abruptly

at the base of the Mount, and in the other broke into a winding path paved with loose shingle on a tar-and-cinder subsoil. For Coblesea was as yet in a state of transition, and like most things in a transitory state it had a haphazard, hastily-tidied-up appearance that was the acme of hideous compromise between rusticity and urbanity. The only beautiful portion of the little seaport was to be found among the remains of the ancient fishing-village, down in the hollow under the hill, from whence arose pungent odours of pitch and brine to mingle with the blue smoke that lazily ascended above the red roofs and crooked chimneys.

We stayed on the esplanade. And the Cockney troubadours' performance was as bad as could be: not that that would have mattered; it might have been quite enjoyable if it had been bad in a vulgar, jolly, full-blooded style; but it was mincingly, genteelly bad, and that way is unpardonable. When the throaty tenor began a song that Ella Candlish used to sing I rose abruptly.

"No; wait a moment," said Rosetta. "I want to hear this. Don't you remember whose song it is?"

"Yes," I replied. "That is why ——"

"Do sit down," urged Rosetta. "People are staring at you."

And I blushed, as a consciousness of my disfigurement swept over me, and sat down again.



"That fellow hasn't such a bad voice—untrained and all that, of course," Rosetta remarked, as we strolled away at last. The speech jarred upon me, for many and various reasons. Apart from the banality of the pronouncement as a whole I hated to hear her use that word "fellow," as she was overfond of doing.

"It was a fearsome row!" I growled out testily. "Surely——"

"I beg your pardon," she broke in. "I forgot you were a judge of music."

"A judge of music!" I echoed.

"And literature and painting and the drama and everything else, of course," she went on, with a little titter.

"I don't claim to be a judge of anything," I protested. "I only claim to have a certain taste in these matters, such as any man of average refinement has."

But she seemed wantonly, wickedly, desirous of provoking a disagreement.

"Do you know," she said, "I am getting rather tired of some of those words you are so fond of. Refinement. Taste. They suggest a pose to me, and I don't like poses."

I stared at her in surprise, more grieved than annoyed. "Nor I," I said curtly.

"And please don't look so solemn and profound,"

said she. "It really doesn't go well with—with the natural expression of your face."

"You were going to say something else."

"Well, I didn't. So what does it matter?" she retorted. "Pray don't be more ridiculous than you can help, Ferdie."

"That is another jibe at me," I cried.

"Oh, don't be so touchy," she said. "I'm not blaming you for—for having a bad complexion, though I should have thought that that sense of humour which you are always bragging about—Oh, Ferdie, I beg your pardon! I really do. Ferdie, I didn't—didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Do forgive me! I could cut my tongue out! But somehow you—you ——"

Hot tears of mortification pringled under my eyelids. I could not speak.

"Ferdie, if you don't say you forgive me this instant ——"

"Of course I do," I blurted out. "That's all right. Let us say nothing more about it."

And nothing more was said. Peace was restored; or rather an armed neutrality prevailed between us. But the irreparable harm was surely done, and could not be undone.

Now, in setting forth the sorry details of this first foolish quarrel I am aware that it has an effect of

being the smallest kind of storm in the poorest sort of tea-cup, and as such is likelier to be provocative of mirth in my reader than any more sympathetic emotion. It was, no doubt, an utterly ridiculous episode; but I imagine that the Day of Judgment, when it comes, will probably find a goodly proportion of us in highly ludicrous situations, though our state will be none the less parlous on that account. Indeed, it has always seemed to me that the bitterest kind of tragedy is that from which the chief protagonist can derive no least possible credit in the way of making a brave show. For I hold that it is far easier to face death at the point of the sword than to face life at the point of a hidden jest, which may flay our pride as with a whip of scorpions.

That was the manner and the end of our first quarrel as I piece it together after a lapse of years. But how our second quarrel arose, and our third, and our tenth, and our last, and all the quarrels between, I do not remember at all definitely.

I only remember that one of our earliest quarrels took place in the dead of night. That I leapt out of bed and went strutting and fuming and raving—but in a whisper, lest we should arouse Mrs. Durber—and circling about the room in a blind insensate fury, whilst Rosetta lay on her back between the sheets and, with her gaze fixed on vacancy, coldly

and deliberately mocked and flouted me, addressing her words not directly to me, but as it were, into space. Whose was the original fault on that occasion I cannot say now. But I know that our altercation seemed to continue for years of agonised existence and that whilst it lasted we ransacked our minds for every cruel device of speech, every cowardly taunt, every hideous innuendo that our perverse ingenuity could seize on. She was infinitely the cooler and more practised hand. Her life at home had rendered her expert in all the vile arts of insult and vituperation. She chose her words with a steady, well-considered deliberateness that barbed them with a rankling poison, so that where they stuck they made a festering wound that seemed to eat into my very vitals. I felt as if she were laying hold on every distinct and separate nerve in my body and gripping it between red-hot pincers and twisting it slowly round and round until it snapped. She criticised my person, my mannerisms, my speech, my opinions, all my little foibles and weaknesses, even those points of excellence in which I had a worthy pride, with a pitiless calculated insight that infuriated me to the verge of homicidal frenzy and reduced me at last to a raging, weeping, blaspheming, abject thing, writhing and spitting venom in its torment like an unclean reptile in the heart of a consuming flame. The advantage was all with her, though I did my deadliest

to repay a hundredfold the hurts she dealt me so shrewdly. But I had not her mastery of the means of torture. I could bluster and curse and inveigh, I could hurl invective, I could threaten, and I could scorch her shrinking flesh with brutal truths about her parentage and her home, her kith and kin. I could assume the loftiest airs of superiority over her and all that was hers and even her sex; but I could not cope with her measured, studied malignity of scorn and contempt, or withstand the force and accuracy of her shafts of ridicule which she launched at me from the recesses of her swift and sure and devilishly apt knowledge of my character; nor could I move her from the impregnable self-restraint in which she wrapped her womanhood as in a natural armour.

The end, then and always, was a false reconciliation in which we flew together and lay clasped in a clinging, hot-breathing embrace, spent and exhausted with our wrath against each other, our bodies merged and interlocked in the throes of a new devouring vertigo of passion.

That was the beginning of what this heavy brooding in a lonely spot by the sea-side seemed to be the end. For the remainder of that week our intimacy had endured as one long bicker and snarl; our intercourse had been stretched on a quivering cord of tense expectancy and frantic unrest in which we

maintained our precarious balance in a perpetual whirl of furious emotion . . . save when these horrible transports were alternated by brief spells of torpor and satiety, and then a cloud of indifference and insensibility seemed to descend upon us and we fumbled at an understanding of one another through clogging folds of physical and mental apathy. I lived as in a horrible febrile delirium, in a sort of blood-shot haze that sometimes darkened to a stifling fog; and in every mood I was torn and racked by a carking apprehension of impending, inevitable catastrophe which I was powerless to avert or escape.

That morning she had been sullenly silent, and I had left her without a word . . . to wander away and somewhere find rest . . . rest and a moment's oblivion in which to forget.

CHAPTER X

THE SHADOW OF THE OTHER MAN

"I HAVE been searching for you everywhere," said Rosetta's voice from the clouds.

I turned with a start, and looked up, and there beheld her, stooping over me as I lay.

She wore a diaphanous white dress of what I believe is called flowered delaine; there were tiny sprigs of violets on it. The sunlight strained through her cream-coloured sunshade in a pellucid stream of mellow radiance, drenching her lissome figure from head to foot and glinting in her burnished hair with a pale milky effulgence. The expression of her eyes and voice was grave and kind, and my heart leaped in my breast responsively.

"I want us to go for a long lazy walk," she said, as I scrambled to my feet. "Are you game?"

"Rather!" I exclaimed.

"By a long lazy walk I mean one of those erratic rambles without an object or a destination," she explained. "The sort of walk that a kitten takes when

it finds itself alone in the vast world beyond the doorstep."

"It should be an adventurous walk, then," I observed.

"Of course," said she. "There is no reason why it should not lead to fairyland."

"Or Paradise," I suggested.

"Or Paradise," she echoed me. "And as for wild beasts and all that kind of thing. . . . Well, every blue-bottle fly is a bird of prey to the kitten, and every clump of grass an impenetrable forest."

Then we laughed in concert and fell into step, side by side.

It had become suddenly a fine brisk morning that had been a weary heavy forenoon. The tide was at the ebb and there was a wide sweep of yellow-grey sand between the beach and the sea. Masses of black flat-topped rocks marked the margin of the water. The sky was blue and clear of clouds. A stiff breeze was blowing in. We went right down to where the tiny wavelets lapped the sand and walked along quite slowly and desultorily, looking seaward. Only natives were abroad in that wild place: a few bare-legged youngsters with brown faces and tow-heads, carrying slimy baskets; some women, bare-legged also, stepping freely, with rude grace, among the rocks; a party of men in doeskin breeches, blue guernseys and fur caps, smoking black cutties over

their sails and nets. An odour of tar mingled with the scent of ocean, not unpleasantly. One of the bare-legged women was singing a dismal ballad of ship-wreck and death, but blithely; her voice blent harmoniously with the music of the sea.

We walked a great way and then struck inland across country, through the ripe corn, over a hill crowned with a windmill, on the side of which a small house was stuck like a huge wen, with a woman at the exalted door of it, and children who might have been angels—a little soiled and grubby from their contact with earth—ascending and descending a very Jacob's ladder—for did it not lead to home, and is not home Heaven? We turned the corner of this enchanted edifice, and there was a well, with a white-headed man working at the windlass, a picturesque old man with a black patch of hair on either cheek, whose red neckcloth and coarse blue shirt supplied just that touch of crude colour which the landscape needed. But accident is ever a good artist, or we should not throw up potatoes when we plant trees. We asked the old man for a drink of water, because we lacked other excuse to talk to him; and we drank the water gladly, because it was so sweet and cool and we were parched. . . . This was a wonderful old man, straight and strong and fairly lithe, of great age, and speaking an unknown tongue. We gave him our hands at parting, and he wiped his own horny palm on his

breeches before taking them, and then thanked us afterwards, quite simply, for our friendly courtesy, so that Rosetta said she loved him for his gentle chivalry.

Then on again through shady coppices, where the soft moss under our feet was pied with tiny blooms, and through fields of rippling grain, all white to harvest, and along pleasant winding by-paths.

"It would be rather nice," said Rosetta, "if one could annihilate time occasionally."

"Or deal with it as one deals with money," said I.

"Yes," she agreed, at once apprehending me. "Now spending it judiciously, now wasting it on riotous living, now putting it away in the bank."

"That bank whereon the wild time grows," I murmured. "Sunlit hours saved up for a rainy day. But—yes!—it would be an improvement on the ordinary, established clockwork methods, I think. The reckless fellow who said that the best of all ways to lengthen our days was to steal a few hours from the night had certainly got at the root-cause of a good deal of our modern discontent, even if he hadn't discovered any very sound remedy for the complaint. Think of the weeks, the months, that every one has wasted in impatient longing, wishing them gone; and yet the loss of them meant a loss of so much actual living. And then think of the all-too-short periods

of unalloyed bliss which most of us would prolong indefinitely if we only could. Such a period as this," said I, catching at her hand.

"You are happy at this moment?" she queried with a certain wistfulness.

"Perfectly," I answered.

"A very little suffices to make you happy, then, Ferdie?"

"Or unhappy," I added. "It is always the little things that matter, after all."

She nodded gravely and we walked on.

It was late in the afternoon when we got back to Sea View.

Mrs. Durber intercepted us in the hall.

"Have you seen him?" she panted out excitedly.

"Seen whom?" I asked, a little impatiently, for her elliptical talk rather got on my nerves.

"The gentleman that called and said he would stroll about and look for you," she replied.

"We have seen no one," said Rosetta. "What was his name?"

"I didn't catch his name," answered Mrs. Durber. "But he was a tall young feller. Very good-looking he was. With a heavy moustache."

"Was his name Wrathall?"

"Ah, yes; that was it," cried Mrs. Durber. "I knew it began with a' R. . . . But you'll be wanting

your tea, I dessay. And I was thinking p'r'aps a hegg ——"

I pushed past her and strode into the parlour, my rage choking me. All the brightness seemed to have gone out of the day. It was as if the sunshine had been suddenly snuffed out, like a candle.

"Mrs. Durber asked you," Rosetta's voice called out, pursuing me into the devastating parlour, "if you would like an egg 'to your tea'." And her drawling measured tones indicated a dawning exasperation.

"No, thank you," I shouted back.

"Not a poached egg?" queried Mrs. Durber, peering into the room with a look of mild astonished reproach on her foolish face.

"Oh, if you like," I answered to silence her.

"No, it's as you like," she insisted. "Say the word, that's all."

"Very well. Let's have eggs then."

"Poached?"

"Yes."

"One or two?"

"One will do."

"One each? Very good, sir." She belched noisily, smiled, and murmured: "Beg pardon, I'm sure. Pork sausages always did serve me out," and then turned to depart, blundering against Rosetta who stood immediately behind her.



There was an ominous silence between us, dividing us. Our halcyon hour had passed. A grey mist seemed to have settled on the aspect of things—or was the mist only in our own eyes? I felt as if a chill wind was blowing about me. The room was an oppression. Its raucous flaunting ugliness seared my sense of vision, as a brass band, confined in that narrow space, would have tortured my sense of hearing. I saw Rosetta's heavy brows contract loweringly, and that sullen droop of the lips disfigure her mouth. But still no word passed. And presently, unable any longer to bear the tension, I escaped upstairs on some mumbled pretext.

I locked the door of the bedroom and sat down on a cane-bottomed chair at the window and gazed out on the squalid little backyards through a red film of rage and misery and mortification. And as I gazed, suddenly the scene became jagged and broken; the light was split up into long undulating prisms; the whole scape jigged and danced madly before my eyes. A hot tear fell upon my hand.

"Damn him!" I cried violently. "I would like to kill him!"

I rose and plunged my face into cold water, disdaining my own weakness. As my habit is—the habit of a lonely, brooding introspective man—I talked to myself, even as the hissing drops splashed and gurgled about my ears. I imaged a dramatic

setting in which Wrathall and I stood face to face, as in the limelight; and forgetting my lowly stature I towered over him. I scorned him; flouted, mocked him. I put him contemptuously aside with a stiff, outstretched arm. My smile of easy superiority daunted and abashed his mean vulgarian soul. He grovelled in the dust. Then he snarled, scowled, hissed and spat at me. I turned and faced him again with awful dignity. He, cowering away and sidling out of my path, snapped and bit at my hand like a cowardly spiteful cur. And then I struck him down. Struck him down with a fierce stamp of my foot upon the echoing boards, my fist catching him on the point of the jaw, my heavy, well-directed, swinging blow seeming to lift him bodily from the ground and then to stretch him on his back, inert and broken. I glowed with fierce triumph. My eyes blazed. My face was set and rigid and deadly pale.

From this vision I turned to the contemplation of my real reflection in the billowy looking-glass on the dressing-table and saw: A dwarfish young man of a muddy sallow complexion, with a heavy countenance that was now streaked and blotched with red patches where the sun had scorched it; an undersized, ill-formed young man with a sebaceous excretion on the tip of his blunt coarse nose, pale watery eyes and a crooked thin-lipped mouth; his large head set unevenly on square high shoulders, slightly bowed, and



crowned with a thin sparse crop of mouse-colour hair, fast disappearing before the encroachments of a premature baldness. But I saw more reflections than one in that looking-glass; and I turned away with a bitter face and a laugh that was yet more bitter.

Rosetta glanced up sharply at me as I re-entered her presence. She had installed herself at the head of the long table, at one end of which a slightly soiled cloth had been spread and the tea-things laid. We ate our evening-meal in a silence broken only by monosyllables. "Will you take some more tea?" "Yes, please." "A piece of cake?" "No, thank you." It was not until I had lit my pipe that she began to talk, and then her voice was acrid with suppressed irritability.

"What shall we do this evening?" she asked.

I hesitated a moment before replying. "Tell you what," I blurted out at last; "let's clear out of this place altogether."

"Leave Coblesea?" she exclaimed.

"Yes," said I. "Why not? I am sick of it. And —and—I must say it, Rosetta,—I have come to the conclusion that these old-fashioned honeymoons are an utter mistake. A solitude of two does not consort with the modern temperament one bit." I tried to speak lightly, began with a forced smile; but the smile faded into a sickly grin, as I was well aware, and ended in something like a sulky frown.

"We should have to pay for these lodgings to the end of the fortnight, just the same," Rosetta reminded me.

"What does that matter?" I said.

"And considering that it was I who suggested Coblesea originally, your wishing to leave it so soon is hardly ——" She shrugged her shoulders and left the rest of the sentence unsaid.

"I know," I replied. "I know that. But I want us to make us a fresh start. We—we were so happy this afternoon. And now ——"

"It's all your fault," she interrupted. "It's your jealous temper makes the mischief."

"But we have been quarrelling, on and off, ever since we came here. And how could I have been jealous before ——?"

"Don't drag Mr. Wrathall into it, please," she broke in.

"I have not attempted to do so," said I with dignity. "But since you introduce his name ——"

She rose abruptly, clenching her hands.

"God in Heaven!" she cried. "I wish I had known the kind of man you were before I married you!"

That outcry shook me to the foundations of my being. I was appalled by its vehemence, by the passion that darkened and distorted her face.

"No, no," I pleaded. "Don't let us— either of

us—say things we shall remember all our lives, and always be sorry for. No; listen to me, dear! Let us be reasonable."

"I don't want to be reasonable," she answered miserably. "I want to be happy."

"The only true happiness is based on reason," I told her. And I think I believed that in those days. "Let us discuss this matter, calmly and quietly. For better or worse, we have joined our lives ——"

She uttered a tempestuous laugh. "Oh, if you are going to start prosing again ——" She threw up her hands with a gesture of weary helplessness. "You are more like some old, fish-blooded professor than a mere boy, such as you ought to be," she said. "Did you never play—fight—make a fool of yourself—like other young men?"

I knew not what to say. "Put on your hat," I said, with an effort, "and let us get out into the fresh air. I think it must be this horrible room that drives us crazy."

"What's the matter with the room, Mister Fastidious?" she jeered, with an unfortunate lapse into her scapegrace mother's manner.

I walked toward the door slowly. "I will wait for you on the parade," I said, and left her.

As the door closed behind me, though I did not turn my head to look back, I had a vivid impres-

sion of her figure collapsing limply on the sofa, and of her burying her face in her hands and weeping. That vision went with me all the way to the sea-front.

The evening air was still and warm, untroubled by the lightest zephyr. The sun dipped to the horizon, a great yellow globe of polished brass, barred with wisps of purple cloud. It seemed to float in a pale green sea that lapped a shadowy mysterious shore, overhung by a pale grey haze that toward the zenith deepened to violet and focussed the paler westering rays into one molten, radiant star. There was music in the air: music of strings and reeds and brass; human music of voices and gay laughter; the eternal threnody of the sea; a distant lowing of cattle and a melancholy bleating of sheep: all commingled with the ringing of a far-off church-bell. A spirit of peace breathed upon the world, and slowly I absorbed it into my heart.

I know not how long I paced the parade, to and fro, before Rosetta appeared. But it did not seem very long. Yet it was long enough to restore me to that kindlier frame of mind in which I was able to think of her with charity and forbearance; or perhaps I ought to say, less priggishly, in which I came to a better understanding of my own shortcomings and so to a more tolerant attitude toward hers.

Her face was placid, her manner deliberate, her tone even and unhurried, as she joined me.

"Isn't it a perfect evening!" she said, as we walked slowly along together.

"I never feel so sure that there is some power outside ourselves, which we can all call God, as on evenings like this," I remarked.

For a moment I suspected that she smiled, but when I turned to look at her I saw that she had become suddenly grave, as if she were about to enter a church.

We watched the setting of the sun—like a monster hand with outstretched fingers, gathering up the gold it had so magnificently showered down since dawn—through all the slow gradations of its ever-changing glory until at last it was utterly dark beyond the white margin of the sea, save in the nocturnal blue where the bright stars pulsed and glittered, thick as hoar-frost in a thicket on a January morning.

The night-air was so balmy that we could sit on the sand and feel no least tremor of cold. The sea was so calm that the path of limpid radiance flung across the waters from the old stone lighthouse seemed as a broad fair road paved with crystal. Across and across that magic way, tiny fishing-boats came and went like the ghosts of lost, forgotten argosies, risen from the fathomless depths of ocean.

We spoke hardly at all. Words seemed a profanation, a desecration, of the beauty of the hour and scene. But it was an eloquent silence that we kept. And I think that we drew nearer to one another in that hour than ever before, nearer even than during the afternoon of that same day when I had told Rosetta that I was perfectly happy.

The beach had been long deserted, and only a few scattered figures broke the moon-lit stretch of esplanade when we rose to our feet at last and turned our faces homeward, and clambered stiffly up the rude slippery wooden steps opposite the entrance to the tortuous High Street.

"You love me now?" I whispered to Rosetta.

"Yes; I do love you, dear," she answered, for the first time. "I think, dear, that ——"

And then she paused abruptly. I heard her catch her breath. I had been peering into her face, but now I looked up with a sudden pang of foreboding.

We had almost reached the bran-new street that led to Mullingar Terrace. Turning the corner was a man's dark figure which I recognised as that of Horace Wrathall. I drew Rosetta into the shadow of a doorway, and he went swaggering up the empty pavement, all unaware of our proximity.



CHAPTER XI

THE OUTER DARKNESS

MRS. DURBER was disposed to be garrulous on the subject of Horace Wrathall, who had called again that evening and, apparently, had held her in conversation for quite a long while. And as I listened to her flood of eloquence I found myself wondering wherein lay the charm of this egregious fellow which was so powerful to move even the most prosaic of women to enthusiastic eulogy, and to inspire the most pedestrian feminine imagination with a glimmer of poetic feeling.

"He told me," said Mrs. Durber, "how you was quite old friends and how he used to lodge along with your Mar and Par, just like one of the family. 'We were like brother and sister' he says to me; 'leastways—' he says. And then he give a sigh. Then he asked me, Did you seem happy——" Mrs. Durber paused abruptly, bit her lip, and looked askance at me.

"Perhaps I had better relieve you of my presence," I muttered; and pushed open the door of the par-

lour, which was still in darkness, and groped my way to the sofa and flung myself down upon it.

I had closed the door, but I could still hear their voices as they talked in the hall, though I could catch only a stray word here and there. It seemed that Rosetta had suddenly become vivacious, spirited, merry. Her tongue went like the clapper of a bell, and she punctuated her discourse with frequent peals of laughter, and little quirks of chuckling mirth, and excited exclamations.

I listened in a growing tumult of vexation. What on earth could she find to talk about at such length with that insufferable woman? I asked myself peevishly. And the answer came pat as an echo: Horace Wrathall. It was he who supplied the common interest between them which enabled my newly-wedded wife to throw off the cloud of constraint that had darkened so much of our intercourse. She was happy and light-hearted now, a gay and irresponsible girl again, in the society of this common lodging-house-keeper, as she had never been in my society since I married her. Why was this? What was the bond of union between these two ill-assorted minds? And pat the answer came once more: Horace Wrathall. Still, it was difficult to understand how they found inexhaustible material for conversation in such a slender thread of interest as —— And then I had a painful qualm of

misgiving which swiftly bourgeoned into a certitude. They were talking about me!

I sat upright on the sofa and listened intently. Impossible to hear with any distinctness. What could they be saying? Were they exalting him at my expense? I did not mistrust Rosetta. I knew that she would be loyal to me—in word, at least. I knew that she would suffer no explicit derogation of my character, however harmless or innocent it might seem. But I knew the devilish ingenuity of women in this delicate evil business of covert animadversion and detraction and disparagement. I knew how they can, by the flutter of an eyelash, by an inflexion of the voice, by a movement of the hands, a smile, a frown, a simper, a dainty grimace, heap ridicule and derision upon the devoted head of their chosen victim. I knew how they can, without once showing the barb of a malicious intention, by subtle means defying analysis, openly belaud one man in such a way as to bespatter another whose name they never mention. And I had a growing conviction that this was what the unspeakable Mrs. Durber was doing for me, with the wholly unconscious connivance of Rosetta.

The thought was unbearable. I rose from the sofa, strode across the room, and flung open the door.

Instantly they were struck dumb. I saw their

startled faces confronting me, under the filtered rays of the pendent hall-lamp, shining down through coloured glass.

"What's the matter?" cried Rosetta, and tone and attitude alike expressed an alert antagonism.

"Matches. There's no light in the parlour," I stammered.

"Have you only just found that out?" she said, raising her eyebrows.

"Well, you did startle me, to be sure!" gasped Mrs. Durber, patting her bosom. "Like a living Jack-in-the-Box, it was." And she grinned offensively and shot a quick sidelong glance at Rosetta, as if there were some new secret understanding, engendering perfect sympathy, between them.

A cold rage of disgust possessed me. "By the way, Mrs. Durber," I blurted out; "we shall not require your rooms after to-morrow."

"Eh?" she faltered.

"We are leaving Coblesea," I explained. "It doesn't amuse us as much as we hoped it would."

"Speak for yourself, Ferdinand," interposed Rosetta stormily. "I am very well content to stay here."

I wished then that I had not given way to that mean petulant impulse which had impelled me to utter so paltry a *riposte*. It would be terrible—but it would serve me right—if Rosetta revenged Mrs.

Durber by forcing a quarrel upon me in her presence.

"We can discuss all that in private," I said hastily.

For a moment I saw the red light of battle flash in her eyes; but it appeared that she had more self-control than I.

"Of course," she replied. "But—is Mrs. Durber to take this as final?"

"As absolutely final," I said firmly; and then went on, as I saw that our landlady was about to speak: "I should, of course, pay for the full fortnight."

But Mrs. Durber was not in the least mollified by this generous concession. "I'm sorry if I've failed to give satisfaction, I'm sure," she returned tartly. "I've done for a good many ladies and gentlemen in my time, let me tell you, and never before has it happened that they wanted to leave before their time was up. Moreover ——"

"I don't think there is anything more to say," I interposed. "Will you kindly light our lamp, please; and be sure to let us have your bill the first thing to-morrow morning."

Five minutes later: "So you've made up your mind to be disagreeable again," Rosetta observed with a sigh as of resignation.

"Not at all," said I. "I told you, earlier this evening, that I was sick of Coblesea."

"I thought you had got over that mood."

"It was not a mood. It was ——"

"Bosh! Everything that you say or do is the outcome of some new mood or other. You have so many moods and you change them so often that I fell as if I had married, not one man, but a dozen," said Rosetta. "I never know what is coming next; and I don't believe you do either. You're like a fretful, fractious child!"

"Rosetta, Rosetta!" I entreated her. "Do you think it wise to keep on saying these things to me?"

A dry sob racked her bosom. "An hour ago I almost loved you," she murmured.

"You said you did love me."

"And now ——" She paused.

"And now ——?" I repeated.

Her lips trembled visibly. She stood staring at me across the table with a look of infinite weariness on her face that to my jealous fancy was tinctured with a faint disgust.

"No," she said slowly. "I don't hate you, Ferdie. But you are tiring me out. I am not used to men like you. I thought my father was difficult but ——"

"Ah, you always put me in the wrong," I cried.

"You put yourself in the wrong," she said disdainfully. "And then you whine, or you bluster ——"



I retorted on her hotly. And that was the beginning of yet another unseemly squabble.

Oh, but it was pitiful, pitiful! My soul sickens at the recollection. I can set down no more ignominious details of our incessant bickering. And it is not necessary that I should. For I have since learned—experience, aided by intuition, has taught me—that what happened during my own unhappy honeymoon is still happening in scores of other cases, similar to ours, even now; and has been happening from the very inception of that accursed institution, and will continue to happen until it is finally abolished, as it seems likely to be, before long.

The squabble developed into another desperate quarrel that waxed to the usual furious climax, in which we hurled at one another taunt and gibe and sneer, sneer and gibe and taunt, deadly insult and deadlier truth, until our rancour was exhausted. And then our wrath declined upon a maudlin repentance and mutual self-reproaches and appeals for forgiveness, culminating in a feverish paroxysm of tearful passion. And then it broke out again with three-fold fury, an hour after we had retired to rest.

I sprang out of bed in the dark, and fumbled on the dressing-table for matches and struck a light with a shaking hand. As the candle-flame leaped up, and then died down, and then slowly flickered

into brilliance again, I made out the vague outline of Rosetta's form, huddled out of sight beneath the bed-clothes. I began to dress, hurriedly. She did not stir, but still remained hidden. Not until I moved cautiously toward the door did she push down the coverlet and reveal her face, all scored with red-finger marks, with all its beauty blotted out. Degraded and defiled she looked, as she sat up and addressed me in a harsh husky undertone.

"What are you doing? Where are you going?" she asked.

"I don't know," I answered. "But I can't stay here, in this room, any longer."

"You must be mad," she said. "What will Mrs. Durber think of you?"

"Does it really matter what Mrs. Durber thinks?"

"Of course it does. Mrs. Durber knows my people. She knows everybody, and gossips with everybody. If she gets to hear of this we shall be made a laughing-stock."

I did not reply, but laid my hand upon the latch.

"You can't go out at this time of night. You sha'n't," she cried. "If you have no respect for yourself, at least have a little respect for me." And she thrust one plump white leg out of bed.

"Rosetta," I said, tremulously, "if I stay here —



if you try to stop me—something ghastly and horrible will happen."

She laughed contemptuously. "More heroics!" she exclaimed. "Another mood! What do you mean by something will happen?"

"I don't know," I said. "Murder perhaps."

Again she laughed, as before. She had both legs out now, half-sitting half-standing, hugging herself in her folded arms and shuddering.

"Don't be an idiot!" she said, in the coarse voice that I hated. "Come back to bed."

My answer to that appeal was to open the door. But she sprang after me and wound her arms about my neck.

"You shall not go!" she panted. "I won't let you."

But I gripped her wrists, and forced her clenched hands apart, and shook her off. She uttered a low moan as she staggered back, but made no further attempt to detain me.

I stole downstairs, took my hat from its peg, softly unfastened the front-door, and so passed out into the open air.

It was that blackest hour before the dawn. There were no lamps in that unfinished byeway. And until my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom I seemed to walk in a darkness that could be felt, blundering against gates and posts and railings, slipping off the

high shelving side-walk into the road, tripping over loose stones and stumbling into the gutters. But I knew roughly my direction, and held doggedly on my erratic course; and presently I could discern my way and step out boldly.

In the High Street the inferior gas-lamps still showed a few blue gleams of light, feeble and wavering. At the foot of that steep main thoroughfare I could see the sea above the house-tops, like a broad swathe of pale mist, dividing the dark roofs from the darker sky. But even as I bore down toward the beach the waste of waters took on a faint irradiation and began to shimmer and to shine with a myriad tiny sparkles and then to change into a shifting luminous evanescence that came and went and came again until it stretched before me, cold and vast and evilly inviting — inviting to Death! To Death! Smiling, beguiling Death! Sweet, hospitable Death! Death stretching out its fleshless hands toward me, calling on me to rest my head upon its heart of ice and receive the kiss of a blessed oblivion from its grisly grinning mouth!

I halted on the edge of the breakwater and stood there, peering out into the profound void toward that growing patch of sky where a thin quivering line of silvery light heralded the rising of the sun. I had a humiliating sense of the inadequacy of my emotions as I stood there and gazed and shivered.



I wanted to feel resolutely bent on self-destruction. It was with some intention of making that final irrevocable end of all my troubles and difficulties and disappointments that I had set out from the house. And now the impulse had evaporated. I felt merely tired and cold and frightened, and miserably, forlornly small and lonely.. Yet the will-to-live was dead in me at that moment; it was only that I lacked the courage to make an exit. I wished, in my helplessness, that some fatal catastrophe might suddenly overwhelm me and wipe me out. I would have welcomed the approach of death, so long as it came in some irresistible form from which there was no means of escape. But to hurl myself into the Unknown: the power to do that was not in me. And not all my arts of self-deception, in which I was so well practised, could persuade me that I had the power. I knew myself to be too inherently sane, too cowardly, or what-you-will, to play the desperate part of the suicide.

Presently I turned and bent my aimless steps toward the Mount. I passed through the narrow deserted streets of the Old Town, plunging into a deeper darkness as I threaded the winding ways beneath the shadows of those beetle-browed houses, and at last emerged upon a tract of nondescript land —half brickfield, half pasture — at the base of the great hill. Slowly, painfully, laggingly, I mounted

the steep slope, my shoes slipping on the short smooth grass, so that I had to bend almost double to keep my feet at all. The path along the edge of the cliff was marked with little piles of grey stones, some ten yards apart, placed there by the coastguardsmen for the guidance of belated wayfarers. It was reckoned unsafe to step upon the seaward side of that crooked line, where only a yard or two of crumbling chalk and turf intervened between the solid ground and a sheer declivity of three or four hundred feet. And I know not why, but I had a perverse joy in walking in that zone of danger, and felt a glow of exultation in my recklessness which I knew to be absurd and yet luxuriated in. If only an accident would befal me now! That was my prayer. And though I am aware that my state of mind must be unintelligible to common sense, yet I am stating only the naked truth when I aver that I was consumed with a longing that I might suddenly find myself falling through space.

And the unexpected—the event that I courted, yet dreaded in my heart—did happen.

The earth gave way beneath me as if I had stepped off the edge of a precipice into vacancy. I was falling, feet foremost, with a dreadful velocity, through the empty air, falling in a hail of stones and dust and grit—down, down!—into a bottomless abyss. There are no words that could describe—or even



vaguely glimpse—my sensations during that brief while in which I felt myself hurtling down to annihilation. For though it was only a very brief while indeed, it seemed interminable. I felt that I had been falling for hours, through miles of space, when the shock of my arrested progress brought me to my hands and knees and I rolled over and, seeming to roll on and on down a never-ending mountain-side—fainted. . . .

I must have lain there stunned, half an hour at least; for when I opened my eyes again it was broad day. I lay flat on my back, on a rubbly surface, and above me was the cold blue sky, abruptly cut off on my right by a wall of cliff, the brow of which was overhung and fringed with coarse grass and weeds and straggling brambles. And my first glad impression was that I had died and entered into a new world where Nature builded on a larger scale than mortals know of; for the cliff edge seemed so far away and yet the wild growths that clustered on its rim were clearly to be seen in minutest detail of tasselled plume and hairy stalk and intorted wrinkled tendril. For the fractional part of a second I gaped and marvelled at this astonishing phenomenon, and congratulated myself on my safe passage through the gateless barrier. Then I perceived, with a nauseating consciousness of bafflement and futility, that I had fallen only a few feet after all. I

had alighted on a small plateau or shelf projecting out from the face of the bluff and tapering away on one side to a shelving path that led directly upward into safety.

In an instant I had scrambled to my feet, not daring to look down, and had begun to make the giddy ascent. And so great was my horror of the fate which had so nearly overtaken me that as soon as I set my feet on the firm green summit of the hill again, I fled headlong from that gulf behind me, and did not pause in my flight until a growing pain in all my limbs and an increasing haziness of vision constrained me to stop.

I sank down, then, in the shadow of one of the old grey stone walls that surrounded the colleges and lay supine, utterly spent and breathless. How long I lay I cannot tell. But I was slowly aroused from my semi-stupor by a new insidious approach of fear: a nameless, carking fear that rapidly swelled into a state of such abject terror that I became slightly delirious. It was in vain I told myself that I had no longer any cause to be afraid. My terror was of that retrospective kind which defies reason. It is the kind of terror that assails the bravest on the battle-field, not during the fight but when the fight is over and the enemy have been put to the rout. I have, since that day, talked with men who have been at hand-grips with death in its most for-



bidding guise, and they have all testified to the horror of that psychical experience: men who have faced the worst dangers without a tremor, though they have deemed their lives inevitably forfeit; they all have agreed with me that there is no agony of the mind so hideous, so maddening, so horrible, as that aftermath of fear which is born of the imagination.

The sun was warm upon the stones ere I recovered even a small measure of composure.

I found that I was not much hurt, only a little bruised and shaken and scratched about the wrists. But I ached in every fibre of my body and my nerves were twittering like magnetic needles. I was so oppressed with fear that I covered my face with my hands to shut out the sky which so implacably and insistently reminded me of that awful moment when, lying and gazing up at it, I had discovered that I hung poised midway between the blue of Heaven and the deep green sea, creaming on the rocks below, into which, by some careless movement, I might precipitate myself.

And then, quite suddenly, I found myself yawning. A moment, and I was fast asleep, worn out with my long night-vigil and the stress of body and soul that I had undergone.

CHAPTER XII

ROSETTA LEAVES ME

IT was high noon when I awoke. I had fallen asleep in the cool shadow of the old moss-grown stone wall, but now the full rays of the sun were beating down fiercely upon my head. The wide scape stretched before me, dusty and parched, into the infinite distance, where hung a palpitating purple haze, under a burning sky. There was no moving thing within my purview. No least huffle of wind stirred the drooping branches of the trees or rippled the brazen surface of the tideless bay. Big fat bees went booming past and a swarm of lesser winged insects buzzed and thrummed and droned about my ears. My face was stiff and hot, and sticky with sweat. My body seemed immensely swollen, and from head to foot I was one dull throbbing ache. I was faint and weary and thirsty. How thirsty I was! My lips were dry and cracked and smarting; my tongue clave to the roof of my mouth. I staggered to my feet, dizzily, and went reeling down the hill toward the town.

Having refreshed myself with a long cooling drink at the nearest inn I made my way to the esplanade where I had a good hope I might find Rosetta, strolling, or reading a novel on the beach, or listening to the band. But though I traversed the length of that crowded, sun-baked promenade, back and forth, three times, I did not find her; and at last I gave up my quest and set off again back to our lodging.

As I came in sight of Sea View I espied Mrs. Durber, her arms folded, hanging over the front-garden gate, gossiping with a neighbour. Which was her favourite occupation at all such times as we were not at home, demanding her attention. Both women turned and regarded me critically as I approached, and under their scrutiny I became painfully, awkwardly self-conscious. Then the neighbour scurried off across the road, and Mrs. Durber straightened herself and opened the gate to me. As I brushed past her I was uneasily aware that she eyed me with an expression of baleful hostility.

"Mrs. Smallpiece in?" I inquired, pausing on the step.

"No; she ain't," said Mrs. Durber.

"When did she go out?"

"About ten, or half-past."

"Did she leave any message for me?"

"No; she never," was the curt reply.

"Do you know where she has gone?"

"I don't."

"Nor when she will be back?"

"No."

"Thank you."

I beamed upon her as if unconscious of any offence and went into the house, leaving the street-door open behind me. As I was about to mount the stairs Mrs. Durber called out:—

"What time will you be leaving, sir?"

I turned. "Leaving?"

"You said you wouldn't be wanting the rooms any more, after to-day."

"Oh—ah—yes," I stammered. I had clean forgotten my ultimatum. "Well, I hardly know until Mrs. Smallpiece comes back. Did she say anything to you about it?"

"Why should she, when it wasn't any of her likes?" said Mrs. Durber, following me into the hall and twiddling a corner of her apron nervously. There was insolent effrontery writ large all over her, on her face, as in her tone and manner. She slammed the door viciously. "I'd like to know just when you're going, sir, so as I can make out the bill all right and proper," she said.

"Oh, make it out to the end of the fortnight."

"Thanking you for nothing, but it isn't my style

to be beholden to people I don't like. I'll charge you for just what you've had and no more."

This was insufferable; but I maintained an imperturbable mien. "Very well," I said buoyantly. "I admire your independent spirit."

"And since it seems you really are going," she added; "there's just a word or two I'd like to say to you, my fine feller, if you don't mind."

"Certainly, I don't mind," said I; "though really ——"

"Yes, it is 'though really,'" she echoed me, with so violent a sneer that every feature of her face was distorted. "And what I've got to say to you, young man, I'll make you listen to, if I have to shout it through your keyhole."

"You needn't do that, you ridiculous creature!" I said. "I'm willing to hear you. What is it?"

"It's just this, my ridiculous creature," she retorted tartly. "You don't deserve to have a wife; and least of all a loving pretty young thing like Miss Conover, poor dear! I can't make out why ever she took you. For a gentleman you are not, the meaning of politeness you don't know, and as for good looks I've seen handsomer monkeys in the Zoo, not to mention their being more amusing. Yes. Always nagging at the darling, and arguing with her like a lunatic, and brow-beating her, and making her life a perfect misery with your whims and fancies,

and your stinking fine airs and graces, and your lardi-dardi way o' talking—you ugly little pimple-nosed barber's clerk, that's what you are! Ah, and quarreling with her in the middle o' the night, as I've heard you a-doing with my own ears, and not been able to sleep through the row. And for all I know, knocking her about as well, the poor innocent! judging by the thumping and the bumping that's gone on, after all decent folks was asleep, fit to wake the dead, not to speak o' rousing the next-door neighbours, as I happen to know it has done." And she paused for breath.

"Is that all?" I inquired.

"No, it ain't all," she gasped out. "What I chiefly wanted to say was this: That it would serve you jolly well right if she left you, honeymoon or no honeymoon, married woman or not, and took up with a better man, which she couldn't take up with a worse. A fine strapping girl like her! I know if I had a real swell after me, like what she has in that Mr. Rottle, I wouldn't hesitate a minute. And why ever she chose you when she might have had him passes my comprehension. But I think she has found out her mistake—poor dear! and no doubt repents of it bitter. In fact, I shouldn't be surprised if she'd gone off to meet him now, somewhere."

"What?" I cried.



She quailed a little. "Oh, yes," she said indomitably. "He asked me, last night, to tell her on the quiet, as he'd be on the look-out for her down by the old breakwater this morning about eleven, and—Ah, I don't wonder at your running away! but, one thing, you've had to hear me, and I don't ——"

The last words pursued me like a curse as I fled upstairs to escape her fierce tirade, and closed the door of my bedroom to shut out the sound of her rasping voice and to put an end to her foul innuendo.

I could hear her beating and banging about below, and clattering her pots and pans and crockery, and raising a prodigious din generally, after the usual manner of women of her class when they have been moved to anger. And I tried to smile and pooh-pooh her; but somehow, at the back of my mind, I had an uneasy suspicion that perhaps, after all, her strictures on my late conduct were not wholly unjustified. Perhaps—as she, at least, was well convinced—the fault had been mainly mine throughout. I felt far less resentment against Mrs. Durber than it seemed to me I ought to feel. I was sure, indeed, that if she could have known what a lenient view I took of her outrageous behaviour she would have been considerably astonished and absolutely confirmed in her low estimate of me as a young man lacking all young-manly spirit. There was humour

in the situation. I found myself to be smiling at the reflection of that absurd squab figure arrayed against the high-toned sophisticated man of culture, such as I considered myself to be in those raw days, and pouring out upon him the vials of her honest indignation from the volcanic heights of a mountainous ignorance that was as far superior to my superior wisdom as beautiful human flesh is superior to the inanimate steel blade that lets out its life.

Then the smile was suddenly struck from my face as my memory probed further into this matter and I recalled the circumstances out of which this particular grotesque situation had arisen. Rosetta? Where was she? Could it be true, as that vixenish shrew had hinted, that she had gone out to meet Wrathall, to keep a vulgar secret assignation with a man so lost to decency that he could stoop to bribing and suborning even the meanest instrument that promised to serve his furtive ends? He would be down at the old breakwater, waiting for her, about eleven. I looked at my watch. It was nearly two o'clock. She had been absent from the house four hours. Where was she? What was she doing? where spending her time? A numbing chill crept over me that seemed to stay the beating of my heart and paralyse all my faculties. I could only sit, with my hands clasped loosely between my knees, staring stolidly into space.

But I was rudely shaken out of my apathy by a loud resounding rat-tat-tat-tat at the front-door: the thunderous, reverberating knock that announces the arrival of a telegram. I heard Mrs. Durber tumbling over herself in her haste to answer the summons. I darted out upon the upper landing.

"Smallpiece," the shrill boyish voice piped out.

I went hurriedly down to take the message. I tore it open as soon as I had retraced my steps upstairs and read: "Am returning to London. Will write. Rosetta."

There was no address added. The telegram had been despatched from Ashtonbury, an important junction thirty miles from Coblesea, just after one o'clock.

I stood, stupidly conning the words again and again; but, for a long while, without grasping their import. Then, slowly, as their full significance impinged upon my consciousness, a great wave of despair swept over me.

She had left me, then! I had lost her! Rather, I had driven her away. I crumpled up the flimsy morsel of paper in my clenched fist, and began to pace the room in a whirl of agitated self-communing. I was filled with a mighty overmastering compunction. It was not any sense of personal injury that afflicted me, but a rankling torturing remorse. What a mean fool, what a petty tyrant, what a paltry

dastard, I had been! How weakly had I let my puny superficial ill-humours override my real deep devotion. How cravenly had I suffered my jealous doubts and prejudices to sway my better saner instincts. I had sacrificed my sincere love of her on the altar of my self-love. I had let my miserable vanity jaundice all my thoughts of her. I had first dishonoured, then persecuted, and finally judged and condemned her without appeal. Throughout I had not once tried to put myself in her place, or to adopt her point of view, or to make the least allowance for her youth and inexperience. I had known what she was, from what breed the sprang, the kind of upbringing she had had, before I had asked her to be my wife. Yet had I taken no account of the limitations that these potent factors in her past had necessarily imposed upon her plastic woman's nature when she fell a little short of my impossible ideal. I had been harsh, carping, captious, exigent; a posturing, posing, prosing bore; a clumsy tactless oaf, no more fit to consort with her than a bear with a fawn. I was suddenly, pitifully aware of my many vain conceits and ineptitudes, my brutal self-sufficiency, my feeble pompousness, my ludicrous dignity, my crass purblindness, my fretful, insistent idiosyncrasies of speech and manner that must have galled and stung her quick feminine sensibilities as if they had been so many prickly burrs excoriating her deli-

cate shrinking flesh. Worst of all, to a woman's eyes, I had the last crowning fault of the conquering male animal, in that I was posessed of no natural physical strength or grace or beauty. And she was so supremely lovely, so sweetly gracious and exquisitely graceful, so richly endowed with those most excellent attributes of robust healthfulness and vital force in which I was so conspicuously lacking. What were my niggling nice perceptions and fine susceptibilities, my vaunted powers of intellect and imagination, and all the rest of that fumy vaporous clap-trap compared with her superb and splendid sexuality? Nor were her charms merely those of pure sex. I recalled how that, besides being tenderly fond and gentle and kind, she could be gravely wise or gaily, wittily shrewd, as occasion called: she could be resolute and brave and patient. And she had said that she loved me! Nay, she had loved me indeed, until I vexed her anew by a fresh outrage and forced her to recant for very shame. . . . My eyes burned and pringled under their lids at that memory and I groaned aloud in bitter unavailing anguish of spirit.

Half an hour later, having bathed and shaved and changed my clothes, I went downstairs again. I was passing out of the house when Mrs. Durber came running from her kitchen.

"One moment, Mr. Smallpiece!" she cried.

"Ain't you going to have anything to eat 'fore you start out again?"

"No, thank you," said I.

"Come, now, you must eat," she insisted. "You'll be ill if you don't. Mind you, I don't take back a word of what I said just now; but all the same I don't like to see a man miss his meals."

I stared at her, and laughed aloud. That her solicitude was genuine I could not doubt. And I was not much surprised. For women are like that. It was only one more item added to my stock of lore on the subject of the inexplicable sex.

"You'd better have just a bit o' something," she pleaded.

But still I shook my head; and, leaving her disconsolate, issued forth into the sweltering sunshine.

My immediate destination was the railway-station. There, on consulting the time-tables, I discovered that the only train to London by which Rosetta could have travelled was one that left Coblesea at twenty minutes past eleven. Now, the booking office was shut; and when I strolled out on to the platform I found it deserted. My further perquisitions, however, brought me into touch with a fellow in uniform, loafing about the triangular yard outside. He was yawning his head off and very ready to talk.

"Were you here when the eleven-twenty for London went this morning?" I asked him.

"Ay," he said, with portentous solemnity after some heavy cogitation.

"Were there many passengers?"

"Nobbut a few. Mebbe five or six."

"Did you notice a young lady?" I described Rosetta.

"Ay. Rale yaller hair, she had. I never see the like. An' a gemman with her?"

"Eh?"

"Tall, fairish chap. Big moustache. Toffish—What's the matter, sir?"

I could feel that my face had grown ghastly. "All right. Nothing," I said. "He—saw her off?"

"Na, na; he went 'long of her."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure as death! Didn't I put 'em into a first-class carriage myself, ay, and locked the door on 'em an' all, as the gemman axed me for to do?"

"Thank you," said I, and slipped a coin into his hand, and walked off slowly; but in a moment I had turned back and was inquiring: "When is the next train to London?"

"Half an hour's time, sir. Three-twenty. Change at Ashtonbury. Booking-office 'll be open in a minute."

I sat down on a weather-stained rickety bench

and waited. The shock of this newly-revealed development of affairs had dazed me. But of one revulsion of feeling I was very conscious; my mood of kindly charity toward Rosetta had changed to one of fierce hatred, which was however directed not against her but wholly against Wrathall. Plainly, my duty was to follow them, even had my inclination not marched in that direction.

The last smouldering embers of twilight were deepening into an ashen dusk when, at last, I alighted from the crawling horse-tram in Tufnell Park, and, travelling once again over the old familiar ground, knocked at the door of the Conovers' house. Just as on that first evening when I had succumbed to Mr. Conover's blandishments and accompanied him home, the Scrapegrace Mother opened the door to me. She was slatternly and unsightly as ever; the hinder folds of her gown trailed behind her in a sodden lumpy tail, just as of old; her face was dirty; her hair untidy; her greasy bodice gaped open in the front, showing glimpses of what might have been the same dirty linen and tags of lace.

As I greeted her I realised the futility of trying to explain to her witless, muddled comprehension the truth of what had happened between Rosetta and me; and I was puzzled what to do; for, contrary to my usual habit, I had trusted to the inspiration of the

moment to suggest a way of dealing with this very problem.

"Oh, it's you," she said, betraying no least flicker of surprise. "Where's Rosetta?"

"She—she's not with me," I stammered.

"So I see," observed Mrs. Conover drily. "What ——?"

"Is Mr. Conover in?" I interposed, briskly.

"No, he is not," said she.

"When do you expect him home?"

"In a fortnight's time—if his money holds out. But if not, sooner."

"Where is he, then?" I exclaimed.

"He's gone to Ventnor for his summer holiday," she informed me. "But come in, come in, Ferdinand."

And, a good deal staggered by this totally unexpected and baffling reception, I followed her into the well-remembered drawing-room.

"How is it, if Mr. Conover is away, that you aren't with him?" I inquired.

She laughed out sourly. "Well," she said. "I been married to him twenty-eight years now, and never once has he took me away, pleasuring, since our honeymoon—a day at Southend. I ain't genteel enough for the likes o' Mister Magnificence, my dear boy. None of us ain't, since Rosetta cleared out."

"Do you mean that he has gone alone?" I blurted out, not very tactfully.

"He went away by himself. But whether he's alone now I couldn't tell you. Most likely not," she added, spitting out the words with fiery venom.

"I wanted to see him," was all I could find to say.

"Funny taste!" she said. Then her expression altered to one of eager anxiety. "Anything wrong?" she asked. "But of course there must be. You should be on your honeymoon; and instead ——"

"I'll be quite frank with you, Mrs. Conover," said I, for now I had decided that after all she might prove a more helpful and sympathetic confidant and adviser than her husband. "Rosetta and I have had a little quarrel."

Even this did not move her to any manifestation of surprise. "Rosetta always did have a temper of her own," she remarked. "Well?"

"She's come up to London, in a huff about something. And naturally I thought I should find her here."

"No; she ain't been here," said Mrs. Conover dully.

I stood staring at her, not knowing how to proceed. I felt utterly at a loss. And she was not the woman to make any attempt to relieve my embarrassment. Thus I was for once unfeignedly glad to



see the door open and Amelia, Rosetta's elder sister, appear. She came in accompanied by the twins, Phoebe and Maud, and the infant prodigy, Ambrose, whom, since they were all in out-door clothes, she had evidently been taking for a walk.

"Lawks!" cried Amelia, eyeing me with open disfavour. "Who'd ha' thought o' seeing you again? What's happened to the honeymoon, for goodness sake——? If you children don't be quiet I'll skin you alive and boil you afterwards!" she broke off. And this threat had the beneficent effect of putting an abrupt end to an improvised trio which the twins and the youngest-born were executing on the piano.

"They've parted, Amelia," Mrs. Conover announced with an air of finality. "Quarrelled."

"Of course they've quarrelled!" cried Amelia. "Ain't they a proper married couple now?"

"We have not quarrelled," I hastened to say. "There has been a trifling misunderstanding, that's all. And Rosetta—Rosetta thought she would like to run up to London," I concluded, lamely.

"You mean," said Amelia with unpleasant directness, "she's run away from you?"

"I mean nothing of the kind," said I.

Amelia smiled maliciously. "What do you mean, then?" she demanded. "But—ah!—that explains something."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. "I came here, hoping things might explain themselves."

"Oh, they do," she replied. "I can see it all now, as plain as a pike-staff. It's that Mr. Wrathall! I wondered what he was nosing round here for, last week."

"He only called out of friendliness, my dear," said Mrs. Conover.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. One thing I noticed: he was very curious to find out where Rosetta was."

"And you told him?" I exclaimed.

"Mother did," said Amelia.

"Well, and what of it?" whined Mrs. Conover. "I should hope as Mr. Wrathall is too much of a gentleman to ever do anything unbecoming."

"All depends on what you mean by 'unbecoming'," said Amelia tartly. "But I do know that he ain't too much of a gentleman—never knew a feller that was!—to make a fool of a girl, married or unmarried."

From which utterance I deduced that Miss Amelia herself had, once upon a time, been numbered in the long list of those who had fallen victims to Horace Wrathall's charms; had, very probably, been slighted or, worse still, ignored by him, Indeed, as she spoke Amelia's eyes were flushed with tears and her face twitched. I had a new up-welling of friendliness toward Amelia.



"Well," I said, awkwardly enough; "I won't intrude any longer. Rosetta promised to write to me to-night, so I must go back to Coblesea at once and await her letter, which I have no doubt will make everything clear."

"It will be a clever letter if it does," said Amelia.

CHAPTER XIII

SOCK AND BUSKIN

To all young men of an excitable imaginative temperament such as mine was—and still is, in a less degree—there are bound to come psychological crises when the woeful inadequacy of their own emotions fills them with a feeling of acute disgust. I have already hinted at this feeling in myself: as when I went down to the beach in the outer darkness and prayed for Death to come to me in some swift silent irresistible form. That feeling was intensified as I whirled back to Coblesea after my abortive visit to the Conover household.

I suppose it is the passion for romance and drama that so obsesses us poor devils of artists and drives us to our undoing. It is our deeply-rooted craving after the dire and inevitable climax that so arrides and unsettles us, and saddles us at last with that incubus of a hot secret shame when events disappoint our hopes or we ourselves fail to rise to the full possibilities of a great occasion.

We have grown so used to dreaming dreams in which effect follows cause in orderly rhythmic sequence, and in which the curtain invariably falls at the appropriate moment on a dignified tableau, that the actualities of mere mundane existence fail altogether to satisfy us. They seem so commonplace, so inconclusive, so irrelevant to the main issues, so lacking in all that makes for seemliness and fitness. Real life is always so very faulty in construction; it lacks a plot; it has no sustained abiding interest, no central theme; it is a mere hotch-potch of banal and incoherent incidents, crudely devised, clumsily arranged, and vilely rendered. At least, that is how it has always appeared to me; and as, no doubt, it must have appeared to innumerable others of a like temperament.

But there are compensations which we artists possess that the average level-headed person knows nothing about. He, the gentle quietist, has to be content with life as he finds it. No such stultifying limitation is laid upon the artist. He moulds reality as the potter moulds the soft wet clay. He shapes and adorns the occurrences of every day according to his wanton fancy. He switches on sun, moon and stars whenever he feels in need of them as easily as you switch on the gas. He has only to close his eyes to see everything that ever was, or is, or will be in the vast sum of all human experience. He has

only to look into his own heart to discover every mystery of human nature. He can change his sex as readily and with as little effort as a kitten changes its mind. He can be a countless host of different people, and then he can be the disembodied spirit of a mob, in the space of a few seconds. He can be at once, actor, audience, and critic. And yet, he is always himself: the overman in our modern phrase; a mortal god among the immortals, planning destinies, dealing out life and death, joy and sorrow, beauty and ugliness, good and evil, just as his whim prompts him or his will dictates.

Only in one direction, commonly, does he fail and fail again, and rarely succeed, to create just the right impression, to surround himself with just the right environment; and that is when he would exercise his powers of self-deception to evoke a genuine passion. All the minor emotions are at his beck and call; but love and hate and the rest of the seven devils are too strong for him. Hence that feeling of woeful inadequacy hereinbefore referred to, which is the only tragedy the artist ever knows.

I suffered every one of its manifold pitiful agonies during that dark night-ride back to Coblesea; and the mood it induced was one of abject stagnant humiliation. What are these creatures in the guise of human fellow-beings who ravage and murder,



curse God and die? I wondered. I knew that it was not in me to do such crimes, to compass such transports. I had the will, but not the necessary driving-force. I killed Wrathall a score of times in my heart; but I was very sure that if he lay helpless in the flesh before me and I had the means of death in my hand, I should not slay him. I should not slay him even if I might do so with perfect impunity, if there were a dozen easy ways of escape open to me, and no possibility of future detection. He was as safe from my revenge as if the width of the world divided us. And yet I wished him dead. I wished him dead as fervently and consumingly as I have ever wished for anything.

Again, I felt that I should be torn with jealousy. That I was something far less than a man, inasmuch as all my thoughts of Rosetta circled about mean trivialities and not what should have been the central motive of my rage against her. I thought of them, him and her, sitting together, head to head, sniggering over some cruel jest at my expense. I thought of them criticising and deriding me. I conjured up her image, plunged into the heart of her, and spied upon her thoughts, as she compared her present lover with her absent husband, stole upward glances at his face which she esteemed so comely and set her recollection of my plain countenance against it, admired his strength and commanding stature as

she contrasted them with my puny proportions. . . . Thus and thus I tortured myself; but though I tried not once did I feel the first faint twitterings of any nobler resentment stirring in me.

It was close on midnight when I arrived in Coblesea, and the little town was dark and silent and deserted as a graveyard. I had been so preoccupied with my burning meditations that I had not considered what I should do when I reached my destination. Obviously I could not knock up Mrs. Durber at such an hour; I should have hesitated to do that had our relations been of the most cordial. In my perplexity I turned for advice and guidance to the station-master who was busy turning keys and shooting bolts; and he recommended me to a little inn in the High Street and very good-naturedly conducted me thither and helped me to make terms with the rather surly and suspicious landlord.

I went to bed, but not to sleep. The sickly daylight was filtering into my room through a misty drizzle of rain when at last I forgot my couch of thorns and fell into a troubled slumber.

Before nine o'clock had struck I was on the doorstep of Sea View.

Mrs. Durber had plainly been on the look-out for me; for she answered my knock before I had let go the knocker. She looked haggard and distressed; and somehow these evidences of her motherly inter-



est in Rosetta—for I did not flatter myself that she cared a row of pins about me—softened me toward her, though indeed I had never reciprocated her animosity.

"Found her?" she asked, as soon as she set eyes on me.

I shook my head.

"Any news?"

"I came to ask you that question."

"Not a morsel," she said. "But there's a letter."

"For me?"

She nodded.

I held out my hand. "Will you give it me, please."

"Better come inside and read it," she urged. "No need to stop out in the rain. You're wet through as it is."

I followed her meekly into the parlour, where the letter made a conspicuous white patch on the mantelpiece. I glanced at the superscription in Rosetta's neat scholarly handwriting and slipped it, unopened, into my pocket. Mrs. Durber's feelings so overcame her, when she saw me do that, that she uttered a long-drawn-out groan.

"What's the matter, Mrs. Durber?" I inquired sardonically.

"Oh, sir—if you'd forgive me—and just read it at once, and tell me if she's all right."

"No," I said. "I want to read it in private. But I will tell you, afterwards, anything that I think you might like to know."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Smallpiece," she murmured very humbly; and reluctantly withdrew.

I waited until the sound of her shuffling footsteps had died away along the passage; then took the precaution of locking the door to keep her out in case she might essay a new irruption; and having done this and seated myself in an arm-chair, I took the letter from my pocket and broke it open with nerveless fingers. The flimsy sheet of paper rustled in my hand as I read.

"DEAR FERDINAND,—I have left you for good—your good and mine. Our marriage was a terrible mistake from beginning to end. We were not in the least suited to one another and could never have been happy together. And now I have done you the greatest wrong that a wife can commit against her husband; but I have done it in order to set matters right, as far as possible. I am here with Horace Wrathall. He loves me, and promises to be good to me. I could say a great deal more; but least said soonest mended. I can only conclude by asking you to forgive me, as I forgive you, and by expressing my sincere good wishes for your future happiness and prosperity. Yours, ROSETTA. P.S. We are going

abroad almost at once, so it will be no use your trying to find us."

That was all. There was no address, no date. The envelope bore the S.W. District postmark.

I was aroused from the heavy lethargy into which the reading of this letter had plunged me by a prolonged vigorous knocking at the door of the parlour and got up slowly to hear Mrs. Durber's voice calling out :—

"Mr. Smallpiece, Mr. Smallpiece, let me in! Dear, good, kind Mr. Smallpiece, do please let me in!"

I crossed the room, a little unsteadily, and admitted her. She staggered in and collapsed on the nearest chair, clutching at her voluminous bosom with her fat red hand.

"Oh, my heart, my heart!" she wheezed out. "Oh, I thought, when I never heard no sound, as you had gone and done it. Oh, Mr. Smallpiece, what a relief!"

I stood regarding her as, in an idle mood, I might have watched the eccentric gambols of some tame queer beast. My mind that seemed detached from my body went groping—groping in impenetrable darkness toward some distant indefinable object—some outlet, a ray of light in the gloom, some dim vague far-off goal the very nature of which I could not determine on.

"What did you think I had gone and done?" I heard myself saying.

"Killed yourself!" she cried. "Oh, lordy!"

"I am not that kind of fool," said I, speaking rather to myself than to her.

"Of course you ain't! I might ha' known you wasn't," said she; and now I recognised, with a faint amusement, the old recurrent note of contempt in her voice. "And what about that poor dear young wife o' yours?"

"She is quite well."

"What?" Mrs. Durber's face expressed acute perplexity and distrust.

"She is quite well," I repeated.

"But—ain't there nothing happened to her?"

"Nothing whatever."

"Well ——" she eyed me doubtfully; and now I saw all her old dislike of me rekindling in her face. And in a dull, stupid way I was pained.

"I must once more ask you to make out my bill," said I. "And while you are making it out I will go and see about having my luggage taken to the station."

I picked up my hat and moved toward the door.

"Oh, but, but—" faltered Mrs. Durber, laying a detaining hand upon my sleeve, "surely there is some news? Are you sure, on your honour, that she is all right?"

"Perfectly so," said I.

She flourished her hands impatiently. "I'm not talking about her health ——" she was beginning, when I interrupted her sharply.

"And I am not talking about her at all—to you," said I. "I have told you all you have—to stretch a point—any right to hear."

She gave me a black scowl as I gently disengaged myself from her clutch and walked out of the room.

As I turned toward the High Street I caught a glimpse of her face behind the parlour-window, still glowering malevolently at me.

And when I returned, an hour later, to pay my bill she would not deign to speak with me face to face but having sent her little girl to open the door to me bawled from the kitchen:

"You'll find it on the parlour-table where you can leave the money. And I'll trust you not to cheat me for the pleasure of not beholding you again."

But in that deep sea with which I was battling Mrs. Durber's little gusts of spite and ill-will passed harmlessly over the breaking crests of the waves that threatened to engulf me. There was room in my mind for only one thought, one purpose; which was to get back to London and seek out Rosetta and make her my very own once more, be she sinning or sinless. And so expeditiously did I carry out my preparations for the journey that I was enabled to

catch the same up-train by which Rosetta had travelled the day before, and which deposited me at Victoria early in the afternoon.

And now, as I approach the one grim happening which splashes this grey chronicle with a dash of lurid colour, and the shadow of which has loomed ever before me, darkening these pages ever since, and even before, I began to pen them: now I grow more and more mistrustful of my ability to set forth the incident as it occurred, with due exactitude and propriety. It is now that I envy the glib journalistic ready-writer, with his stereotyped phrases and his knack of suggesting the horrific and terrible by a subtle process of elimination which leaves out all the essentially important details, such as a record of the chief protagonists' sayings and a description of their appearance, their manner, their gestures, the inflexion of their voices, and all the other vital accessories that go to the making of pure drama.

What I most clearly and vividly remember is that it was an evil, capricious day: a day of alternate shade and shine, of scudding sunburst and pitiless cold hail, set to a muttered orchestration of distant thunder and illumed by intermittent flashes of pale lightning.

I took a cab to the City, my first aim being to get on the track of Wrathall.

When I arrived there the weather had settled

down to steady rain and the streets were a weeping desolation in which the swarming hordes of money-spinners bobbed about, sodden and peevish, under long processions of gleaming umbrellas, oddly suggesting to me a fantastic dance of mushrooms. I had several acquaintances in the City, and had little doubt that I should easily ascertain the whereabouts of Wrathall's office from one or other of them, since he was a man whose peculiar activities as an outside broker, or bucket-shop keeper, or whatever other kind of freebooting craft he belonged to, was one that depended largely for its success on public advertisement. Perhaps I may not have had much hope that I should immediately find the man himself, but I knew the City underling in all his varieties, that he was venial; and so I reckoned on obtaining my rival's private address without any great difficulty, at a price.

It was drawing on toward four o'clock when I made my first inquiries at a solicitor's office in the Wool Exchange, and was miraculously successful at the initial venture.

"Heard of him!" cried my one-time fellow-clerk at Messrs. Keogh and Maw's, a man named Hicksey. "Heard of him! Who hasn't? Bit of a shyster, though, old man. Leastways . . . isn't a pal of yours by any chance, is he?"

"Not at all," I reassured him.

"Glad to hear it, my son. Well, then, 200A Burnside House, Copthall Avenue, is where he rooks 'em," said Hicksey. "I'll write it down for you." Which he did, and tossed the scrap of paper toward me. "Sorry —" as it fluttered to the floor. "I say, if you can wait half a minute we'll go into liquidation together over this business. There's a new girl at the Crown and Cushion I'd like you to see."

And as the price of a drink was, I knew, the precise amount of the fee he charged for his information, I had perforce to conform to immemorial custom and accompany him to a public-house in London Wall.

But as we stood side by side in the crowded saloon, awaiting the barmaid's pleasure, it was suddenly borne in upon me with all the force of a reasoned conviction that brandy is a good thing to put heart in a man; and I realised that after all it was likely that I might be face to face with Wrathall in a few minutes, and that then it would behove me to present a bolder front than I felt I could readily command in a normal state. So, when I gave my order, it was half-a-quartern of Courvoisier for me and the remainder of Hicksey's soda. He stared.

"How long has this been going on?" he inquired with mock severity. "You never used to bend the

elbow. Though, by George! old son, now I come to take a good liker at you, I must say I've seen healthier-looking corpses. What's the caper?"

I laughed.

"Man, you're quivering all over like a bally blanc-mange!" he exclaimed. "'Pon my sivvy, you shake the foundations of the earth!"

"Does Wrathall keep a large staff?" I asked, to divert his chatter.

"Devil an office-boy!" replied Hicksey. "I reckon his are the sort of secrets a man doesn't share even with his wife. All done by telephone and wire and District Messenger. By the way, married yet?"

I hesitated, then lied boldly. "Not yet."

"I am," said he, with a half-humorous, half-lugubrious grimace. "Mug's game, they say. But I don't know. Sometimes I think it is, sometimes I don't. Bears a bit hard on the collar first go-off, perhaps; but not so dingy when you settle down to it."

An overmastering desire to extract some of the wisdom of experience from this jejune but sophisticated youth beset me; and I said: "At any rate, a fellow has always got the honeymoon to look back on".

He winked with a portentous solemnity. "Oh, don't!" he said. "Let the dead past bury its dead for the sake of the boys and girls that used to be."

"Surely ——?" I prompted him.

"Old man," he whispered in my ear; "the honeymoon's a holy fraud. Take it from me, I've had some. Talk about battle, murder, and sudden death! Well, it's a marvel to me, seeing what a lot of newly-married couples there are knocking about, that they don't bring off the triple event more often than very seldom. I tell you —— No; why should I shatter love's young dream? And if it is a nightmare—anyhow, you wake up all right, and after that you sit down to breakfast together and take a rational interest in your food."

"Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings," I quoted, with a deeper significance than he knew.

"Yes; they help," he said. "Ah, that's the girl! Neat about the neck and shoulders—what? But, there, I'm a combine, now." And he sighed.

Yet he looked rosy and happy; he had a dancing eye; there was a thrilling note of self-satisfaction in his voice. I felt that I was taking useful lessons from this scatterbrain.

"Another?" I suggested, touching his glass.

"Oh, come off it!" he cried. "Do you want to send me back to the office with my head spinning like a top. No, old man. There's the missus and the duplicate in embryo to think about. And jobs aren't three a penny, you know, this side of the workhouse. . . . She is a bit of thorough-bred, isn't

she?" ogling the girl behind the bar. "And now I must grease, as the song says. And I wish they would say 'em instead of singing 'em; it might be less painful, sometimes."

I parted from Hicksey with a pang of regret. He had somehow done me good. As I watched him shouldering his way through the press I envied him. He, at least, seemed to have achieved philosophy of a sort. I had known him, years ago, as a thoughtful studious boy with ambitions, who had meant to do what are considered big things in the narrow circumscribed world of the City. He had had a pretty taste in poetry and the drama. And he had come to this. He had come, by way of love and matrimony and fatherhood, to that state in which security of income is the one supreme blessing that a sane man desires. Recalling his sleek person and beaming face, his high spirits, his air of self-sufficiency and look of simple shrewdness, I was, despite my great tragedy, a little uplifted with new hope. If I could get Rosetta back. . . . I had security of income already. Why, then, should not all these things be added unto me?

200A Burnside House was a bijou set of offices constructed out of one medium-sized apartment by the agency of matchboard screens. I saw that Wrathall shared his business premises with two other firms, a gold-mining company and a South American

guano syndicate, each with a long-winded name of dubious lustre.

I rapped on the ground-glass panel inscribed "Clerks' Office." Rapped again. Again. Receiving no response I tried the handle. The door was locked. At that season of the year, however, when many City men were out of town, this was not surprising, even had I not known that Wrathall had other pressing preoccupations outside his business concerns, and had I not moreover suspected that the company and the syndicate whose titles adorned his door might very well be no more than convenient aliases for one and the same person.

I was standing there, pondering my next proceeding, when I felt a warm current of air tickling the nape of my neck and, turning, confronted a seedy-looking individual in a green frock coat which had once been black and a slightly piebald top-hat that had once been glossy and shapely, and who smelt abominably of bad beer and mildew and cheese and onions. A single glance at this unsavoury apparition was sufficient for me to identify him as a full private in that lost army of scribes and process-servers, the social wreckage of the profession, which drifts precariously upon the outer edges of the law.

"What do you want?" I demanded sharply, as I started back.

He pointed an inky finger at the door upon which



I had been rapping and answered in a ghostly voice: "Him!"

"Mr. Wrathall?"

"Ah—him."

"Well, he's out," said I.

"No, he isn't," said he.

"I've just knocked," I told him.

"I've been knocking ever since half-past one," was the rejoinder.

"More fool you!" I muttered.

"Not so, fair youth," said he. "I tell you Mr. Wrathall is in there yet."

"Eh?"

"I know he is. I followed him up these stairs and saw him take cover. Then he locked the door on me. And when I knocked he didn't answer, though I could hear him walking about inside."

We both stood silent, listening.

"Well, he's quiet enough now," said I.

"Hasn't made a sound this two hours past."

"There's no other way out?" I queried.

"Nary a fire-escape," said he.

"I must see him," I said. "My business is most urgent."

"So is mine," he replied. "And I mean to see him if I have to wait here all night."

"But why wait?" And I applied my knuckles to the glass once more.

"He's lying low," said the stranger. "He's hoping to tire me out. Hush!" He laid his forefinger on his lip and glared over my shoulder.

I wheeled about and beheld another new-comer: a big, powerful, craggy-faced, clean-shaven man in an ill-made suit of grey checks.

"Pardon me," he said gruffly, thrusting his burly form between us; and then he began to belabour the door with his fist, having first rattled the handle.

"'Tec!" the shabby-genteel stranger informed me, mouthing the monosyllable silently.

"You waiting to see this gentleman?" the burly man asked, nodding toward the name on the door.

"Yes. I want to see Mr. Wrathall most particularly."

"So do a good many more. Seems he's cleared out, though," said the burly man.

"He's there, right enough," said the seedy one confidently.

"How do you know?"

"Saw him go in. And I've not taken my eyes off the door since."

"H'm!" The burly man regarded me searchingly.

"Will one of you gentlemen go down and fetch the housekeeper?" he said.

"I can't go," said the seedy one. "How do I know you ain't a pal of his, come to help him to give me the slip?"

A fleeting smile darkened rather than lightened the big man's face.

"Will you go, sir?" he asked me. "I promise you he shall not escape."

And the tone in which he uttered these words proclaimed him indisputably to be what he was indeed, a detective.

"Certainly," said I, and went straightway upstairs to the topmost floor and brought the housekeeper back with me. He, an ex-policeman, recognised the detective at a glance, and at once assumed an authoritative official manner.

"Open this door for me, will you, Jelks," the big man commanded.

"Got a warrant?" whispered Jelks. "I must ask."

"That's all right."

"My instructions, you see ——"

"It's all correct."

The atmosphere seemed charged now with an electric quality of tense expectation as the housekeeper stooped and fitted the key in the lock, whilst we stood behind him, watching him with parted lips and suspended breath.

The door swung open, inward.

The detective entered first, with the housekeeper hard on his heels, and the seedy stranger and myself following after at a respectful distance.

The outer office was a mere closet containing only an office-table, a stool, a chair, and an oil-stove. The detective knocked at an inner door marked "Private".

"Come, Mr. Horace Wrathall!" he shouted. "We know you're here, you know."

And then we all drew back and waited for Wrathall to answer, or to appear in person. But nothing happened. There was dead silence.

"You're absolutely certain he's here?" growled the detective, darting a darkling glance at the seedy one.

"Wish I was as sure of going to Heaven," was the reply.

The detective tried the handle, rattled it violently, pushed lightly against the door, pushed harder, pushed with all his might.

"Tain't locked!" he muttered, pointing upward. "Look!"

And following the direction of his finger we saw that the upper part of the door had bent backward under his weight, so that we could see a thin segment of brown wall through an open chink.

"Give us a hand, Jelks," said the detective. "I don't like this." His expression had grown sternly fearful.

Bending down together, side by side, the two men thrust back the door, slowly, inch by inch, pushing



away some heavy obstacle that lay against it on the floor of the inner room.

Peering over their bowed backs I was suddenly rendered giddy and sick as I perceived that that obstacle was the body of a man. A moment, and I knew it to be the dead body of Horace Wrathall.

CHAPTER XIV

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

"So he's done us, after all," growled the detective, disgustedly; and to my horror he touched the dead body, though ever so lightly, with the toe of his clumsy boot.

"Don't—! For God's sake—!" I cried out, starting forward; and then I drew back, abashed.

"What's the matter? Friend of yours, was he?" demanded the detective.

"No," I stammered.

He gave me a suspicious glance: the man reeked of suspicion; then he sank on one knee beside the corpse. It lay on its side, the face crushed against the carpet and wholly obscured by one out-flung arm. I turned away.

"And he's done me, likewise," muttered the seedy one. "Matter of four or five bob in my pocket it would have been, if I could have served him."

"You knew this fellow Wrathall, sir?" the detective asked me over his shoulder.

"Yes."

"Personal friend?"

"No. Only a very slight acquaintance."

"Any idea where he lived? His private address, I mean."

"No."

"Couldn't tell us where to send?"

"No."

"Married, is he? Got any relatives or friends that you could give the names of?"

"I know practically nothing whatever about him," I said. "As I have told you, he was the merest acquaintance. In no sense was he my friend."

"Seems to me he was nobody's friend—unless he was his own, and that's a problem," the detective observed. "I shall have to rely on you, then, Jelks," turning to the housekeeper, "to do the usual." Then he addressed me again. "But perhaps you wouldn't mind identifying him as well, sir," he said. "Mere matter of form, that's all. Ah, and I must ask you for your card, if you please," holding out his great hand toward me, with the horny palm upturned.

"I will give you my card with pleasure," said I; "but I would rather not ——"

The detective snorted. "I only want you to take just a look at him, in case you should be called on as an independent witness," said he. "More for your own sake than anything."

He bent lower as he spoke, and with an effort that made him grunt heaved the body over on its back. Then he drew aside.

Usually, I have found that death dignifies a man. Usually the least impressive of human creatures are somehow ennobled by the common tragedy of that final visitation, or at least touched with a cold majestic pathos. But here Death had outraged its own mortal symbol by making Wrathall look ridiculous, horribly grotesquely ridiculous. His face was swollen and twisted and discoloured. He seemed to leer up at us ogreishly out of half-closed eyes. I shuddered at the sight and averted my gaze.

"That's sufficient. Thank you," said the detective.

And I blundered back into the outer office, blinded with nausea. The process-server followed me.

"Hi!" the detective bellowed after him, and his coarse loud voice seemed a wanton desecration of the silence. "I shall want your card as well, you know." And he grinned.

But the seedy one, with admirable gravity, plunged his dirty right hand into his breast-pocket, pulled out a bulky pocket-book, and extracted a card therefrom.

"That's me, if you want me," he said, handing over the document with a flourish and a bow. "And

now, sir," he went on, in a low confidential tone as he laid his hand on my shoulder, "I should like to have a word with you, sir."

A rebuff was on the tip of my tongue; but I stifled it as I reflected that it was possible this man might be of some assistance to me in my search for Rosetta.

"Well?" I said ungraciously, shaking off his hand.

"Might I ask, sir," he said in a deferential tone, "what was the nature of your business with the deceased? I am aware that the question may appear to you in the light of am impertinence. And of course you are justified in refusing to answer if you don't wish to," he added quickly. "Only I thought I might perhaps be able to help you in some way."

I hesitated. He stood awaiting my pleasure with a drooping head, his attitude a travesty of meekness.

"You two gentlemen can go now, if you like," the detective told us curtly. "I sha'n't want you any more at present. And you're rather in the way here."

"Yes, let us go," said the seedy one, rousing himself and straightening his back. "I'll take you somewhere quiet. No, sir. After you, sir. I couldn't, really——"

To put an end to the fresh display of ceremonious politeness with which he threatened me I

pushed past him roughly and preceded him downstairs.

"Come," I said, as we emerged in Copthall Avenue, "this street is as private as any place I know of within a mile or so. Tell me how you think you can help me."

"No, really, sir; excuse me," was the suave rejoinder, delivered with an air of mild reproof. "But it is for you to tell me, first of all, what it is you want to know particularly."

"I want—his—Wrathall's—private address."

"Then I am your man," said he. "But ——" and he paused and smiled expressively.

"I understand," said I. "Well, how much?"

"Would five shillings—?" His cunning eyes appraised me from head to foot.

Without a word I handed him the money, and he was visibly saddened with regret that he had not asked more. He dropped the coins into his pocket with a mournful sigh.

"Write the address down, please," said I.

And on the back of an old envelope, with a stub of pencil, he wrote: "13 Rodney Gardens, Wood Green, N."

"I tried to serve him there, half-a-dozen times," said he. "But he was too shy. Too old a bird. Never at home. No doubt his landlady had her instructions, and of course I am not very fashionable."

"I suppose he was in desperate difficulties?" I hinted.

"Right up to his chin, I should say. That's why he had to go under. Writs and summonses and bankruptcy notices. Any amount, and every kind. And, as we have just seen, a police-warrant to top off with. Talk about ——"

"Good afternoon," said I, and turned my back on him and strode off.

"Go to the devil!" he shouted after me. "And tell him I apologise for sending you."

And that made me laugh, almost hysterically.

For it was not from any fastidious sense of repugnance that I had treated this poor creature so cavalierly. Indeed, I should have had great joy of him at any other time. But just then all my desire was to be alone, to get away from all human contact and set my mind in order. My experiences of the last few days, and especially of the last hour, had been of a kind to lay waste the soul of any man. My brain was seething with all manner of wild speculations. My thoughts had got out of hand and were dragging me in half-a-hundred different directions at once. I felt lost and helpless in the vortex of whirling impressions that crowded upon my mental retina. The tumult within me was so fierce, so clamant, that I had the feeling of one who has been badly bruised and shaken by a heavy fall.

I longed to get away to some sequestered spot where I could find peace and quietude in which to re-adjust my bemused faculties and recover my tranquillity.

My straying unheeding steps had led me at a great pace into Cheapside, I discovered, when I at last looked up and took cognizance of my bearings. The massive dark walls and sombre dome of St. Paul's loomed up before me, cliff-like and crowned with a rounded hill on which stood the lonely golden cross of Calvary. On an impulse, I turned in at the open gate, crossed the narrow strip of asphalted garden and entered by the eastern porch.

For an hour I rested in that cloistral retreat, huddled up in a dark corner of one of the pews. And gradually the softening mellowing influences of my surroundings: the dim religious light, the glowing stained-glass windows whose rich eloquent loveliness makes prayers for the inarticulate, the solemn beauty and austere strength of the towering grey masonry, the lofty grandeur and the gloomy splendour of the cathedral's noble proportions, the mystery and the magic that were everywhere about me, brooding among the marble monuments of departed greatness: these things working together wrought upon my bleeding and battered consciousness, calmed my pulses, and poured a holy healing balm into my wounded sensibilities.

I rose at last and went out into the thronging congeries of busy streets: re-invigorated, purified, uplifted, and made whole again.

Rodney Gardens was a short broad byeway, nestling amid masses of young verdure: secluded, severely primly residential, and highly genteel.

A neat maid in a snowy cap and streamers answered my knock at the door of No. 13. I had carefully formulated a series of judicious inquiries and began by asking:—

"Does Mr. Wrathall live here?"

"Yes, sir; but he's out just now," she said.

"There is no one else whom I could see, I suppose?"

She looked at me doubtfully for a moment and then answered: "Perhaps—if it's important—Mrs. Wrathall—What name, sir?"

But her unexpected reply had so affected me with surprise that I was for the time being bereft of the power of speech. Swiftly the conviction flashed upon my mind that it must be Rosetta, my own Rosetta, whom the maid referred to as Mrs. Wrathall. If that was so then my quest ended here. And if it were to end thus, what was now to ensue?

"What name, sir?" repeated the maid.

"Say a friend of the Conovers'," I contrived to gasp out.

"Yes, sir. Will you step inside, sir?"

I entered the spacious hall and she shut the street door behind me, then tripped upstairs. Presently she reappeared on the landing.

"Will you please come up?" she called down to me, and stood waiting.

My eyes pricked hotly, my throat was dry, my knees quaked under me, as I went up the stairs, and was ushered into a large handsomely furnished room on the first floor.

"Mrs. Wrathall will see you in a minute if you will kindly take a seat," said the maid.

And mechanically I sat down.

The girl had hardly closed the door when another door communicating with an inner apartment opened and a woman entered; a stranger with a faded complexion, drawn features, and tired eyes, who looked as if she had wept all the colour out of her face and all the joy out of her life, years ago. She advanced a few paces quickly, and then stood regarding me with eager curiosity.

"You come from Mr. Wrathall?" she said.

I had risen and stood fumbling my hat-brim nervously. "You are ——?"

"I am Mrs. Wrathall. You have news of my husband?" Her weary voice rose to a sharp note of anxiety.

I knew not what to say. This new dramatic de-

velopment in my affairs was so contrary to my expectations, and even through the shock it had caused me I realised so poignantly how the nature of my mission had now completely changed its character, that my wits went utterly astray and I could only stare back at her foolishly.

"What has happened?" she cried.

"I—you will forgive me—I—I ——" Words failed me again.

A strained look of acute alarm was dilating her large pale eyes and transforming her livid, tense face into the hideous similitude of a death-mask.

"Tell me what it is you have come about," she said. "You say you are a friend of the Conovers. I used to know the Conovers. Rosie Conover was my friend." She plucked feverishly with her finger-nails at the loose skin of her throat. "Who—who are you? What do you want?"

A cold moisture broke out upon me; my body, my face, my hands were drenched with the dew of my agony.

"You—you are his wife?" I found myself saying, in a husky parched voice that I hardly recognised as mine.

"Of course I am his wife. Tell me, what have you come about? Has something terrible happened to him?"

I made another abortive attempt to reply, but could only nod my head.

"Is he dead?" said she in a shrill whisper. "Say something, for God's sake!"

"Yes," I heard that strange voice answer her. "He is dead."

She stood swaying, with clouded eyes, her hands clutching her temples; then, as I started forward, she suddenly toppled down with a crash and lay sprawling, her arms outspread at my feet. . . .

The noise of her fall brought first the maid at a flustered run and then a buxom middle-aged woman, the landlady, more leisurely into the room.

My recollections of what passed during the next few minutes are so vague and incoherent as to be indescribable. I only know that somehow I made them acquainted with the bare fact of Horace Wrathall's death, and that I left the true explanation of my own presence there a mystery. But they were so busily occupied with the stricken wife, who only revived from one swoon to pass into another, that they had no thought of cross-questioning me. Instead, they seized upon the opportunity to put one of my sex to his destined use, and sent me for a doctor.

I brought him back with me and awaited his verdict, which was sufficiently ambiguous not to be too



reassuring, before I took my final leave of that quiet house upon whose native snug dulness and prosaic daily routine I had intruded—as it seemed to be my unfortunate lot to intrude everywhere—so disastrously.

CHAPTER XV

OUR GOOD ANGEL

THE rain had ceased, the wind was blowing brisk and chill, but it was a fine evening, as I emerged on the street and turned my face southward.

I had not gone many yards before certain problems concerning my immediate future, which had been crouching at the back of my mind like lurking enemies, took definite shape and rose up before me, demanding instant solution. And it was irresistibly borne in upon me that I was beset on all sides by what seemed to my jaded fancy a very barbed wire entanglement of insuperable difficulties and embarrassments; though in reality, as I should have perceived in a calmer mood, they were all of them trivial enough, ridiculously trivial, with one formidable exception. That exception revolved about the prosecution of my search after Rosetta. For now it appeared to me that she had vanished out of my ken as absolutely and inexplicably as if the earth had opened and swallowed her up. Where was she? My only clue to her whereabouts, and it had seemed

an infallible one, had broken off short in my hand, and how to find it and pick up its severed end again I knew not.

By an unaccountable transition my thoughts flitted to that little home-nest of ours at Hampstead which we had builded with such splendid confidence and plentiful hope, only a few weeks ago. I pictured its pretty rooms, desolately empty; the garden that was to have been a playground of the imagination, overrun with a wild riot of unsightly weeds. . . . And then, with the swift inconsequence of an inspiration, I discovered myself to be dwelling fondly on the image of the fair girl who, as we had promised ourselves and her, should be the first as she must always be the most loved and honoured of our guests in that abode of perfect bliss, because she was also the dearest of our friends: Ella Candlish.

Why had I not remembered her sooner? How had there come to be a hiatus in my memory so wide and deep that it could engulf her, whilst it permitted all sorts of inconsiderable others to remain on the surface? At once she filled the puzzling gap in my mental machinery of which I had been so sorely conscious, and which had hitherto made all my strenuous thinking an aching barren waste of time, a fruitless, bootless threshing of the empty air. It was amazing, it was incredible to my re-awakened sanity, that I could have forgotten her, our good angel, the

one being in the world I had never known to fall short of my most sanguine and exacting expectations. The very thought of her was so exhilarating to my wearied spirit that it revived and refreshed me like a draught of some magic cordial. I was as one plucked out of a bottomless black pit and set upon a sunny pinnacle where the strong light dazzled me. My despair was changed to a serene joy. My fears became as the shadows of an evil dream. How could anything go wrong in a world that Ella Candlish still adorned and glorified with her presence?

And all this while she was living not very far from where I stood. . . .

The tall red barracky buildings, raising layer on layer of cheap small flats to the darkling sky, that composed the street in which Ella lived, were stained a deeper red, as to their upper parts, with the blood of the dying day. The square open doorways admitting to the stone-paved halls yawned black and cavernous on the narrow side-walk like the entrances to a series of vaults. I stood before that gloomy portal in whose shadow I had so often waited for Rosetta in our far-off courting days, and was seized with a new trepidation. If Rosetta should be concealed within those walls, as now seemed very prob-



able—for I divined that the same instinct which had driven me to seek out Ella would as surely lead Rosetta to the same bourne—how should I greet her? how would she receive me? And what was I to say, to do? My impulse, I knew, would be to hold out my arms to her and waive all explanations. But my incorruptible commonsense warned me that this might be by no means the wisest course for me to pursue. For there was still a heavy outstanding account between us, with little credit on either side. If I knew Rosetta's temper, and I thought I might claim that I did, any abrupt and ill-considered submission on my side was likely to prove only the prelude to a final and irrevocable severance of our two lives which not time nor good-will nor reason could ever avail to bring together again. A hasty word, a bitter retort, a glance of reproach, of scorn or triumph, an angry tone or careless gesture, the merest *nuance* of expression: any of these might serve to put an end to any least hope of our reconciliation and reunion. I felt that for once, if ever, I had cause to hesitate at that momentous juncture of our common destiny; and I fled from that open doorway to the distant corner of the street in an overmastering access of panic-stricken misgiving and dread.

At the corner I halted and stood pondering. If

only I could see Ella and explain; if only I could enlist her sympathetic aid and beseech her advice before I sought to interview my errant Rosetta I felt that all would yet be well with my future. I knew Ella would not, could not, fail me. I was as sublimely certain of that as I had now come, by a subtle process of intuitive reasoning, to be certain of my young wife's inherent innocence, all the evidences of her guilt notwithstanding.

I waited there in the falling dusk for what seemed an intolerable while, my gaze fixed on that square black patch between the grey pavement and the high red-brick wall; and slowly and dully I had arrived at the tormenting conclusion that all I could do was to send a message to Ella through the post—though that course opened a dreary prospect of delay which I felt I could hardly brook—when suddenly I was startled out of my torpor by the sound of her voice, Ella's voice, in my ear.

"It is Ferdinand, isn't it?" she said.

And I turned and beheld her in the flesh.

"Ella!" I sobbed out.

She extended both her hands to me, and I clasped and held them.

"I expected you," she said smiling. "Why didn't you come sooner?"

"If only I had!" said I.

I felt the firm gentle pressure of her fingers against mine and it seemed to me that some of her calm strength flowed into my veins at that contact in a warm purifying current. She was just the same! Only ten days had passed since I had last seen her, and yet it gave me a shock of surprise to realise that she was just the same. So much had happened to me in that interval, of suffering and vain longing and unrest and desperate misery, that I seemed to have lived through years of sensation and experience since she and I had talked together face to face. All that irresponsible period to which she belonged seemed so far distant, to belong rightly to so remote a past, that to find her unaltered struck me as the most astonishing circumstance that I could ever have conceived as taking place in my wildest flight of imagination.

"And how lucky it is," she said, gently withdrawing her hands from my grasp, "that I did not go away, after all."

"Ah, why haven't you gone?" I asked, remembering then that she had purposed taking a fortnight's holiday at the seaside as soon as (in her own phrase) she had got rid of us.

"I couldn't go. My brother is ill again," she replied.

And in that simple avowal of her goodness was

revealed all the innate nobleness of her character. A woman with less lofty nature would have made a secret of her self-denial; but Ella was never conscious of any virtue in sacrificing herself to what she deemed her duty, and so she never attempted to conceal her good deeds. This brother of whom she spoke was a helpless invalid, hopelessly afflicted, whose life had only been prolonged by means of the money which his sister lavished on him out of her meagre savings. "And now you are here," said Ella, "I suppose you want to know all about our poor Rosetta?"

"She is with you?"

"Yes."

"Thank God for that!" I exclaimed with fervour.

"You are two very silly children," said Ella. "And I think it is now your turn to be scolded, Ferdinand, since I have finished with Rosetta and am now administering comfort to her."

"I am in need of comfort too,"

"No. The medicine—the bitter pill—first," she returned. "Then the lollipop. . . . Oh, how could you quarrel with her, Ferdinand!"

"I did not find it such a very difficult matter," I said ruefully.

"But it was surely easier not to."

"I don't know."

"It is really wonderful how little a man can con-

trive to know and yet retain his self-respect," observed Ella.

"I assure you I have hardly any of that last commodity left now."

"That's not true," said she. "And even if it were I should hope to make it grossly untrue before I had done with you. Shall we walk about? Or would you prefer to go straight to Rosetta."

I shrank from the suggestion. "No. Not just yet. Not until I have explained things to you a little. That is, if you will listen?"

"Oh, I am rather good at listening, I think," Ella said, lightly, and I saw that there was a certain definite purpose concealed behind her deliberate airiness of tone, which contrasted so vividly with my own almost morose earnestness. "And Rosetta will not expect me yet awhile. I told her I might be late back, if I found my brother worse, and fortunately he was rather better than usual."

"I—I was afraid to go up to your flat at once," I began tremulously, as we paced along through the quiet streets, side by side; "because I guessed that Rosetta might be there. And I thought that perhaps she—she might not be quite—quite friendly—yet. And then—there is so much to clear up and put straight. And we—we are so quick to fall out—I didn't know——"

But at that point my stammering tongue refused

its office and gave up the effort to express what was in my mind. I lapsed into a shamefaced silence.

"You know, Ferdinand, that you can trust me?" said Ella gravely, after a short pause.

"I know."

"As Rosetta has trusted me?"

"She has trusted you? Yes. Yes," I murmured.

"She has told me everything—and more besides. More than she suspects, perhaps. And the first word I have to say to you, Ferdinand, is this: That she loves you very, very dearly."

"She loves me!" I repeated. "But——" and I stopped.

"Weren't you sure that she loved you?"

"She never said so. That is, only once has she said so. And then I fancied it was just a mood—an impulse—that made her say it."

"She loves you. And she has been loving you all along. But perhaps without quite knowing it. For there is this about love: that one can love with one's heart whilst one disapproves with one's head."

It did not occur to me at that moment to wonder how Ella knew this.

"That is true enough, at any rate," said I.

"You have both been very foolish," said she. "You have both asked too much and offered too

little—which, as you know, is said to be the fault of the Dutch. Not that it matters very much, since you are both so young."

"Ah, but ——" I cried; "do you know about this?"

And I pulled out of my pocket the letter in which Rosetta had told me she was with Horace Wrathall, and handed it to her. We paused under a street lamp whilst she read it; for it was now dark.

Then, "Yes, I know all about that, too," she said.

"And still you would uphold her?" I said, all my former furious resentment rekindling in me as I recalled the agony that letter had caused me.

"I uphold her—yes," answered Ella staunchly; "though I cannot defend all that she has done. All I can say is that I think she was a little mad when she wrote these words, and that you had helped to reduce her to that condition."

"She did run away to London with him?"

"I don't accept your way of putting it, but—yes, she did. It was wildly wrong and foolish of her; but there was nothing base or wicked in her conduct. Thank God she came to her right mind in time."

"You must tell me plainly all that happened," I said with a certain grimness; for now I was beginning to doubt if, after all, I could ever find it in my heart to forgive Rosetta.

"But first," she replied, "you must tell me that you are willing to be reconciled, if she is."

"How can I promise any such thing until I know the facts?"

"It is not the facts but our interpretation of them that matters most."

"At least, I have not been false to her."

"Nor has she been false to you."

"How can you say so?"

"It is true."

"But, Ella," I protested, "surely you would not have me condone ——"

"Yes," she interposed eagerly, "that is just what I would have you do, and her too."

"What has she to condone?"

"Only your conscience knows."

"I mean: What is the worst that I have been guilty of compared with the shame she has put upon me?"

"I have told you that she has done no wrong."

"How can that be?"

"She has done you no more wrong than you have done her. Listen, Ferdinand. There are some facts of life which we are all forced to recognise sooner or later, but which we agree not to talk about as a rule. Yet there are times when to be squeamish is to be merely cowardly; when to mince one's words is merely to sacrifice one's sense of right and

justice to a false delicacy. I feel that it is laid upon me now to say to you that Rosetta has not done you that great irreparable wrong which you are hinting at. She is as pure as I am myself. You must believe that."

"I cannot doubt you, Ella; but —"

"You cannot doubt her, either. I know my Rosetta. She would not lie to any one, least of all to me."

"Still ——"

"Accept my assurance that, unless you are going to let an idle punctilio stand between you, there is no reason why you should not come together again. Yes, and be as happy as—as I am half inclined to say that neither of you quite deserves to be. Unless you do accept that assurance, how can I go on? It would not be fair to her to betray her confidence if no ultimate good is to come out of it."

"You mean that I must undertake to forgive her blindly?"

"Not blindly, Ferdinand. Your knowledge, your insight, your love of Rosetta must surely have helped you to see a little way into her heart. And if what you have seen has not taught you to trust her ——"

"You forget," said I, "that if, as you say, she is guiltless of the greater wrong, she is self-convicted by her letter of cruelly deceiving me."

"When she wrote that," Ella said, "she honestly believed that she was expressing her mind."

"Then she was guilty in intention if not in fact."

"Have I not told you she was beside herself?"

I groaned. All Ella's special pleading was powerless to persuade me now. I felt, with a pang of unutterable woe, that the fair fabric of hope that I had raised was fast crumbling into ruins about me.

"Ella, you must tell me at once what really happened between him and her," was all I could find to say.

For a moment Ella hesitated.

Then, "I will tell you," she said. "I will tell you, relying on my belief in you, on my faith in your goodness of heart that will not permit you to withhold that mercy from her which she is willing to extend to you. For know this, Ferdinand, that 'sin' is just a word which we apply with a vastly different meaning to the different sexes, and even to different members of the same sex. What may be lightly passed over as a harmless peccadillo in a man is sometimes reckoned a deadly offence in a woman; whilst a woman may say and do very many things and incur no blame which a man may not lend his countenance to without dishonouring himself. You know this. Then bear well in mind whilst I am telling you what Rosetta has confessed to me that all sorts of extenuating circumstances

are to be taken into account before you dare deliver judgment on her; and that not the least of them—and now I must speak very bluntly, even if I hurt you terribly—not the less of them has been your own cruelty. Cruelty may seem a hard word to use. You might prefer to describe your conduct in some euphemistic way as 'thoughtlessness' or 'lack of consideration,' or something of that kind. But it was cruelty: nothing less. For here is a fact for you to ponder at your leisure. Cruelty is as often the outcome of an excess of imagination as of an utter lack of it. And the more refined kind is all the more horribly cruel because it can only take effect on an organism as sensitive as its own, whereas the other kind of cruelty only gluts itself on the flesh, and can strike no deeper. You see that? You understand me?"

"I think so," I said slowly.

She caught my hand and pressed it between her two soft warm palms.

"Forgive her!" she pleaded with me. "Forgive her, Ferdinand! Are you so wise that you find others' folly unpardonable? Are you so great that you can afford to be petty? Forgive her, fully and freely, before I show you that you must! There is so little merit in that forgiveness which must first justify itself, which is so poor in quality that it can only wipe out the smallest faintest blemish, and

cannot pour itself out in an inexhaustible flood of love and tenderness and compassion so as to wash away the darkest, deepest stain. Be big, Ferdinand! Be fine! Forgive her!"

"I will forgive her," said I.

Then she told me all—and so much more—that Rosetta had confessed to her.

CHAPTER XVI

ELLA'S INTERPRETATION

"WHEN you broke out of the house in the dark of the morning," Ella began, "you left Rosetta in what I can only describe as a state of smouldering fury. She has told me that she had never been so angry with you before, or ever felt so implacably unforgiving. For above all things Rosetta hates to be made in the least degree ridiculous; and she knew that Mrs. Durber must have overheard your departure—and drawn her inevitable conclusions. But, Rosetta says, she was not at all alarmed or anxious about you. For she never has imagined you as doing anything very desperate or wild. She holds that you are very much wiser than your words; that, whatever you say, you are always careful to walk with the utmost circumspection. And I think she is right."

I winced. There are some good opinions that are not flattering.

"She says she was quite sure of one thing: that you would not kill yourself. But then every aver-

age healthy-minded person experiences considerable difficulty in realising the idea of suicide in connection either with themselves or with anybody they have known at all intimately; and so that particular settled conviction of hers did not count for much, perhaps. Indeed I have sometimes thought that a great many of those unfortunate people who destroy themselves may do so in a fit of pique, to confute their sceptical friends. . . . What Rosetta hoped for, however, was that you would speedily get tired of prowling about by yourself in the cold and the darkness and come creeping back to bed like a sensible man. And then she remembered that you would not be able to get in without rousing up the house; and so she determined to sit at the window and wait and watch for your return, in readiness to steal softly downstairs and admit you as soon as you appeared.

"It must have been a dreary vigil for her, though patience can never be accounted a virtue in us women, since it is our second nature. She saw the moving shadowy darkness change to the first ghostly grey of dawn, and then the light steal slowly over the face of the earth, tearing off its veil of mystery, until it was broad day at last, the sun coming up like a peal of bells to summon the waking world to its appointed tasks. Hour after hour she sat and shivered there, in frosty displeasure, her heart grow-

ing ever harder and harder, the well-springs of her love for you turning slowly into ice.

"Four—five—six—seven o'clock; and still you had not returned. At seven o'clock she heard Mrs. Durber go heavily downstairs, and the creaking of her boots sounded like derisive tittering. And now she knew that it was too late to hide the truth of what had happened, without downright lying. And Rosetta, as we are agreed, does not tell lies. But the thought that you had once more, by your egregious conduct, made her a laughing-stock in the eyes of the landlady seems to have goaded her to a pitch of rancorous resentment against you which was, I am afraid, horribly akin to hatred. 'All I hope,' she said to herself, 'is that he has left me for ever. I never want to look upon his face again.'"

Ella paused. I was at once astonished and mortified by her manner and tone.

"Go on," I said gruffly. "I think I know why you are so careful to leave nothing out."

"I am only trying to put her point of view before you, that's all, Ferdinand," she said, with quick compunction.

"I know," said I. "Go on."

"She did not mean that, of course," Ella hastened to explain. "And the proof that she did not is forthcoming in her meek confession, made to me,

that as time passed and still you did not come back she began to be very indignant with you for daring to have the hardihood to stay away so long. 'Surely,' she began to say to herself, 'he has not really left me. Surely he could not of his own free will cast me off.' And when nine o'clock—ten o'clock—struck, and still you had not returned, her indignation swelled to a fresh outburst of wrath, and she dressed herself and went out in a flaming rage, not having very definitely decided what she was going to do next. But—I am afraid again—her one paramount desire was, above all, to punish you, hurt you in some way, revenge herself upon you.

"And, quite near the house, she encountered Horace Wrathall who, she was pretty certain, had been looking out and lying in wait for her."

Again Ella paused. And again I said, as before: "Go on".

"As you know, Ferdinand," she went on, "Mr. Wrathall is a man of very great personal attractions."

"Oh, Ella!" I groaned. "*Et tu Brute!*"

She shot a puzzled quizzical glance at me. "Of course, you do not like him," she said, as if perforce recognising a curious deficiency in me. "And I am not at all sure that I like him myself," she added, on reflection. "At the same time, you may take it from me, as a woman of considerable womanliness, that there is something about him, some elusive

quality, which does possess an almost irresistible charm for my sex. He is big, good-looking. There is a pale Greek massiveness about him. He has a sort of indolent, insolent, masterful manner. One can hardly say exactly wherein the particular fascination lies. But it is indubitably there, as any woman would testify. And Rosetta was no doubt very sensible of it. Indeed, as I believe you know, or I would not speak of this, there was a time when she was more than a little in love with him, and I have no doubt would have married him if he had asked her."

I was nettled in my own despite by this untimely reminder. It seemed to me that Ella was handling me with gratuitous cruelty. "Need you dwell on that?" I asked her.

"I think it is essential that I should, or you may be sure I would not," she replied. "Believe me, I have no desire to wantonly cause you any unnecessary pain. But don't you see that if you are to understand aright you must take fully into consideration all these minor factors that go to make up the sum total of the big catastrophe?

"Rosetta had always liked him. And at that moment, with her mind inflamed against you, his gallant deference, his frank admiration of her beauty, his unfeigned delight in her society, and the pervasive air of chivalrous consideration and devotion with

which his strong personality seemed to surround and envelop her, was doubly grateful and soothing to her lacerated sensibilities.

"'You're out early,' he said. 'I hadn't expected to see you so soon. From eleven to half-past was the time I mentioned.'

"Now Rosetta ought to have been very cross with him for so boldly acknowledging his shameless behaviour of the day before. But—well, she wasn't. I think she must have smiled a kind of white, drawn smile, a smile of secret distress and misgiving.

"'Were you offended with me when you got my message?' he asked.

"She did not answer. For she had been offended, deeply offended; but now she did not wish him to know that. So, she was silent. And silence is sometimes a great liar.

"'I suppose you wouldn't have turned up?' he said.

"'I don't know,' she replied, and that was quite true.

"Where's your husband?' was his next question.

"And again she had to reply, this time very unluckily, 'I don't know'.

"'I say,' said he, in his large expansive way; 'it would be rather a lark—it would serve him jolly well right for neglecting you so abominably'—you see, he took the worst for granted—'if you were to

give him the slip for an hour or so and cut loose with me.'

"That was what he said, and it was unpardonable, of course: one wonders that such men can be; but instead of being virtuously shocked and indignant —or, rather, instead of following the prompting of her instinctive repulsion—poor Rosetta outraged her better self by saying: 'It is certainly rather dull by oneself'.

"He saw his opportunity. 'Tell you what,' said he, 'let's catch the eleven-twenty up to town, and I will waltz you round and show you the sights and all that. You could easily come back to-night, you know. And nobody would be any the wiser. That is, unless you have to account to your dearly beloved for every moment of your time. And as he seems to go off on his own whenever he chooses I hardly see why you should.'

"Now Rosetta tells me that when he said that her first impulse was to send him about his business, then and there. I think it was the sting in the tail of his speech that stopped her from doing so. That, combined with her longing to be revenged on you in some way, was what drove her astray.

"'Will you?' he asked her.

"And she said, 'Yes'.

"And having said Yes nothing could have induced her to retract. Indeed there is something

in the spoken word that seems always to wield a pernicious and malign influence over a woman's better judgment. A woman is peculiarly the prey of words. She is always as likely to keep a foolish promise which she has given in haste as she is to shirk any of her most solemn obligations, if only she can somehow so twist the meaning of a word or a phrase as to seem to justify herself. You have observed that for yourself?"

No, I had not observed it, then, and said so, sullenly. But I have proved the truth of her theory since, many times, though I do not subscribe to its universal application.

"From that moment onward," Ella proceeded, "you must think of Rosetta as wilfully shutting her eyes to the folly of her conduct and going blindly forward to her own destruction. We women are subject to these extraordinary aberrations, you know. You smile, Ferdinand, but it is so. And the wisdom of some of the greatest minds has crystallised that truth in scores of such sayings, as, 'Every woman is at heart a rake,' and 'Frailty, thy name is woman,' and again, more profoundly, 'A woman sometimes scorns what best contents her'. Through all the ripest philosophies runs that note. And if you begin to wonder why we women do these things, are so strong in our weaknesses, you will go on wondering until you die, and then be no nearer any solution



of the mystery; for we ourselves cannot explain it to you, neither the wisest nor the most foolish of us. I want you to realise, Ferdinand, that in whatever she did Rosetta's conduct was perfectly in accord with what might be called the consistent inconsistency of the traditions of her sex. I am bound to say, indeed, that two women out of three, in Rosetta's plight, possessing her proud spirit, her force of character, her passionate temperament, and—yes—her perverse mind, would have done precisely the same. Still you are not convinced?"

I shook my head.

"It seems, then," said Ella, laughing outright, "that I shall have to be very straight—brutally straight—with you. That I must say something to you now which will make you wish I were a man so that you could hit me. There is a great deal of the woman in you, Ferdinand. It is just because there is so much of the woman in you that you are not so successful with women as men of a coarser fibre are, usually. And whilst I am on that subject I would like to say that the two sexes do very often get mixed up in the same body, far more often than is commonly supposed. There are lots of great bearded giants with gruff voices, striding about whose flesh and blood is the only masculine part of them. And there are just as many fair, fluffy, clinging young damsels whose femininity goes no deeper

than the skin. That is why I say quite seriously that there is a lot of woman in you. And there is. I've studied this matter thoroughly, and I pronounce with confidence. Come! Have you never yourself done things that you would have thought you were utterly incapable of doing, things that made you wonder afterwards what could have possessed you to do them? You have, I am sure. You are that kind of womanly man. And Rosetta is another kind of manly woman."

"You mean that we are neither of us too well-balanced: isn't that it?" I asked. "But, anyhow, I would rather you stuck to plain narrative, Ella. I don't quite see——"

"I am only trying to throw side-lights as I go along. But—very well. . . . Rosetta, then, carried away by some power outside herself, swept off her balance by all manner of conflicting, intorted motives, caught up in the swirl of a mad, unreasoning, devil-may-care mood, consented to accompany Horace Wrathall to London. That was all she committed herself to. And he was clever enough not to hint at the possibility of anything beyond that. Indeed, I am inclined to think that he had no intention at first of trying to tempt her to do wrong. Though there were, perhaps, secret springs working in him that were very like to make him more than usually reckless of consequences. And in the train——"



Yet again she paused.

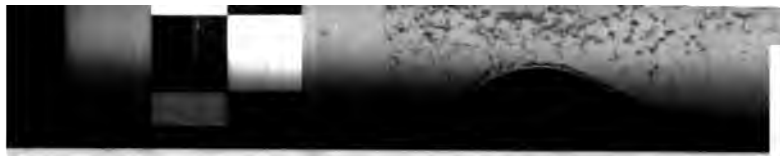
I urged her, with a frantic gesture of the hand, to proceed.

"He told her that he loved her. Adored her. Worshipped her. He vowed that he had always preferred her above all other women—and he suggested that there had been others. He asked her to go away with him, to leave England, to have nothing more to do with you. He painted a rosy future under a sunny southern sky: it was really all so much stereo. And then he became the practical shrewd man of affairs. He pointed out to Rosetta that you would divorce her, and then they could be married. And in a year or so they might come back and settle down to respectability. He told her he had always had a craving after respectability. He must have pleaded and argued with consummate skill and address, and with every appearance of deep earnestness, devouring ardour. Yet he was quite—what shall I say?—respectful. He seemed to put the very strongest constraint upon himself. And she . . . Ah, Ferdinand, she was worn-out—worn-out by her long night's vigil, by her daily struggle with you, by a long succession of passion-wasted days and nights; she was sickened and frightened by the illimitable prospect of bleak unhappiness that her marriage with you had threatened to open up before her. There seemed no faintest ray of hope

for either of you in the drab desolation of years that stretched away ahead of her. And then there was her burning sense of injury, her fiery resentment, her morbid anger verging on hatred, her longing to requite the bitter shame and humiliation you had put upon her with a worse, more bitter shame and humiliation. Above all there was the handsome face and stalwart presence, the proffered devotion and self-abnegation, of the man before her—a man for whom she had once felt a great tenderness and who still fascinated and attracted her—perhaps in an ignoble way, but then she had hardly had time, yet, to recover from the shock of marriage, the shock of having suddenly discovered the full meaning of her womanhood. The aftermath of that new birth was still a-reaping. It was the appeal of the flesh. . . . She could not but draw invidious comparisons ——"

I uttered a furious ejaculation. "As I thought!" I cried.

Ella checked me, sternly. "Yes," she said; "in mercy I must be merciless now—to you, as I have been to her. This is not a time for cant and pretence. Be honest as I am. Face facts as I do. Who are you—who am I—who is anybody—that they should claim to be superior to human nature? To climb one must start low down; one can only descend from the summit, unless one flies off into



the windy sky. . . . Listen again! She drew invidious comparisons, and that superficial contrast between you was not to your advantage."

"Nothing excuses her," I cried, "if she gave in to him!"

"She did not. She parleyed. She temporised. Held out against him. Strove in a very agony, as she has told me and I believe, to take counsel with herself apart in some cool ante-chamber of her mind, before she committed herself to that irrevocable step. There was still that indomitable quality of womanly caution left in her, despite the tumult of emotions that battled to possess her, body and soul, which comes like a saving grace to rescue us from ourselves, the sex-part of us, at all such desperate crises of our spiritual life. She pleaded with him for a little more time in which to reflect and consider before she gave her final answer.

"He behaved with the utmost consideration towards her. He made no effort to take her by storm, or to sway her by any unfair means. So they arrived in London, after changing at Ashtonbury when she sent you a telegram. And," said Ella, "I imagine it was the despatching of the telegram that eventually led to her later, momentary, surrender.

"She pictured the effect that that message would have upon you. 'Am returning to London. Will write.' It was more than a veiled threat of re-

prisals. It was an open declaration of war. It hinted—it practically said outright: 'I am tired of you. I am leaving you. I am done with you for ever.' The message had hardly started on its way before she realised that to follow it back to you would be to make an impossibly abject confession of error and folly and weakness such as her pride revolted from. It would be to bow the head and humble herself and admit that she could not do without you after all; that badly as you had treated her, grossly as you had wronged and slighted her, cruelly as you had wounded her love, she was still ready to serve you and obey you, if she could not honour you, and submit to you in all things for the sake of your august countenance, not to mention the material benefits it was in your power to bestow upon her. She felt that the sending of that telegram had cut off her last means of retreat. And how she wished that she could recall it!

"She told me that during the latter part of the train-journey she was wholly occupied in debating with herself whether there might not even yet be some way out of the *impasse* that she could follow with dignity and self-respect. The thought of returning to her home drifted across her, but only to be dismissed as she foresaw the kind of reception she was likely to meet at the hands of her family. You know them! And then she thought of me;

but she supposed I was far away. It might be possible for her to find a lodging in some remote quarter of London, and there lie hidden for a time, until she could go back to school . . . and then she remembered that as a newly-married woman living apart from her husband she would be regarded as an outcast and a pariah by her fellow-teachers; her position among them would be nothing less than intolerable. She could not bear to be a byeword among them, possibly a butt for the shafts of scandal—worst of all, an object of compassion. . . . And even to find a lodging was not easy for a girl in her ambiguous plight. Poor Rosetta, you know, has never been used to fend for herself. And to the girl who has always lived a sheltered life, who has always had the routine of her days planned for her, whose needs have invariably been provided by a sort of special providential dispensation, who has never had to scheme and devise and contrive; to such a girl the idea of living alone is terrifying. Still, it seemed the only course. She would do that. And then—she discovered that she had only three-and-threepence in her possession,

"It seemed to her, then, that she must indeed abandon herself to utter despair, since now all responsibility had been snatched out of her hands by this last mean stultifying circumstance.

"And when they reached Victoria and Horace

Wrathall took her to an hotel, and then—still humbly and patiently, but with that air of demanding a definite statement of her intentions which men are so apt to assume and which is so devastatingly inimical to self-possession in the average girl of little experience and no power of initiative—he said: 'Well Rosie, what is it to be?' she looked up at him with what I picture as a haggard strained face and replied with white quivering lips: 'It must be as you please.'

"He did not hesitate. 'Write to him, then,' said he.

"And, as if under compulsion, in a dazed transport, she sat down as he bade her and wrote that letter to you. And as soon as she had finished it and addressed the envelope he snatched it up and went out and posted it. He would not trust it to the care of any servant. And that," said Ella, suddenly becoming radiant, "was the mistake that undid him and at the same time saved Rosetta.

"For the moment he left her the spell of his personality was broken. At last she was able to see her conduct in its true light.

"She tells me that her horror of herself when she perceived what she had done and to what lengths her anger against you had led her, was so great that it completely overwhelmed and stunned her, so that for a while she did not quite know what she was



doing. Only vaguely does she remember rushing out of the hotel in a panic of fear, and plunging into the first labyrinth of narrow byeways that promised to confuse her trail. Throughout she must have acted, as the metaphysicians say, subconsciously. Yet there is no doubt that she acted with a certain admirable discretion, too; and very much to the same effect as if she had had all her wits about her.

"For more than an hour, as she believes, she must have gone wandering about the streets with no sense of direction, aimlessly, purposelessly, not knowing whither she went or what she was doing, until at last she came to herself again in the Hampstead Road, and at sight of that familiar thoroughfare, so long identified with her homeward journey from school each day, she burst into a sudden storm of weeping.

"'And my tears made my eyes clear,' she told me 'so that I could see and judge sanely again. And of course, it was to you that my thoughts turned, in my first moment of clear vision. You would be away; but now I saw that that did not matter so much. I could obtain your holiday address at your lodgings and write to you.'

"And so she came, with broken wings and found me."

That was all.

But though I have striven, with the uttermost art at my command, to set down a faithful report of all that issued from Ella's lips that night as we walked the quiet tree-embowered avenues and terraces of Hornsey, I am conscious in reading over what I have written, that I have lamentably failed to satisfy myself, as I fear I must have failed to convey to the reader any right conception of the swift dramatic power of Ella's narrative, and the crystal-clear lucidity of her interpretation of all its tangled incidents. There seem to be gaps, incoherences, false quantities; the effect is inchoate, inconclusive. But then I reflect that both you who read, and I who write, are deprived of Ella's illuminating presence, her eloquent changes of expression, the thrilling intensity that she infused into her hurried, breathless sentences, her zeal in the cause of our happiness—Rosetta's and mine; above all are we shut out from the influence of that aura of sanctified sweet charity—in which there was nothing maudlin or self-conscious—which clung about her like a perfume, like a fragrant emanation of her soul, flooding the souls of all who came under the domination of her magic personality.

"So your story ends," said I; "and my sequel begins."

"Your sequel?" she said.

Then I told her all that had passed since I returned to London.

"So you see," I observed in conclusion, "that Wrathall is proved a scoundrel to the very core of him. God knows what were his intentions toward Rosetta; but that he already had a black load of crime on his conscience is pretty evident from the manner of his exit. That kind of man does not kill himself because a woman shows him what he is. And then there was the police-warrant: that spells some kind of fraud, I expect. No doubt he was meditating flight, even while he was doing his worst to seduce Rosetta. Or he may have drifted into that imbroglio, in a kind of careless desperation. And he hated me! One thing is plain: that if he had taken her away with him it would have been only to involve her in his own disgrace and ruin, possibly in his own condemnation, had they been found together. Why he suddenly made that tragic end we do not know for certain, yet. But it seems to me that very likely some unforeseen eventuality arose; he had made some miscalculation, which brought detection nearer than he had reckoned on, and the danger found him unprepared and —— there was nothing else to do. . . . Then, that poor woman, his wife, an old acquaintance of Rosetta's —— Think of the heartlessness of that and ——"

"No, no, Ferdinand!" she expostulated. "It is not for us to judge him."

I was silent.

"Shall we go back, now?" she said.

I smiled faintly. "It is not always possible," I said.

"But in this instance ——"

We turned and retraced our steps.

"You have not forgotten your promise, Ferdinand?" whispered Ella with unusual timidity, after a long pause.

"No," I answered. "But I see with your eyes now. There can never rightly be any question of forgiveness between one human being and another. What claim have we to usurp the divine prerogative? We can only say: Let us join hands again, and walk together, for love and pity's sake."

"Then you believe now that she ——"

"Yes. Thanks to you," I replied, "who have taught me to understand."

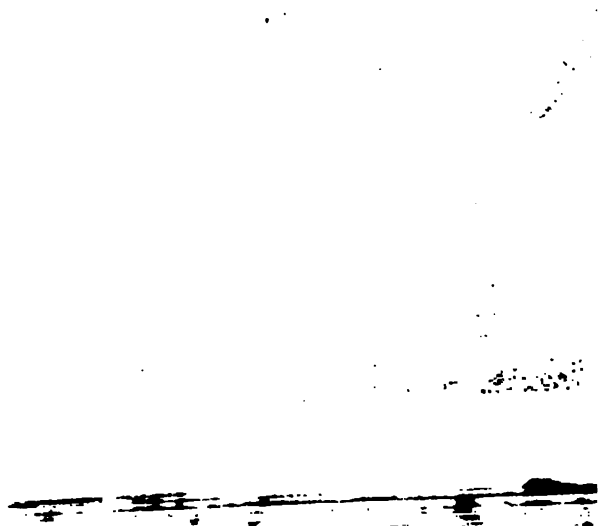
"To know all is to pardon all," she quoted softly.

"And, besides," I added; "I have need of her."

THE END

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